CHINA REPORT

Volume No. 147 August 2025

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## INTERNATIONAL

**Direction of Trade: How China is consolidating economic partnerships**

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Traditions blend into modernity as Xizang's cultural spirit thrives

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## Celebrating Dr Zhu Buxian’s 65-Year Career and His Achievements in TCM

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丹萸書院

# China's economy proves resilient amid trade war headwinds in H1

Against a backdrop of an intensifying trade war and rising geopolitical tensions, China's economy is not just holding steady, but has gained ground, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics on July 15. Largely buoyed by robust consumption, exports to emerging markets and rapid technological innovation, China's GDP reached 66.05 trillion yuan (US$9.2t) in the first half of 2025, a year-on-year increase of 5.3 percent, exceeding the 5 percent annual growth target set by the Chinese government.

Of particular note are the tourism and cultural sectors, which are becoming new growth engines, as sports, entertainment, transport and holiday spending all achieved double-digit growth

Data shows that domestic consumption has emerged as the primary driving force of China's economic growth, contributing to 52 percent of GDP growth in the first half of the year. Retail sales rose 5 percent year-on-year to 24.55 trillion yuan (US$3.42t), with a 5.4 percent increase in the second quarter, indicating accelerating growth in consumers' confidence from the first quarter. Of particular note are the tourism and cultural sectors, which are becoming new growth engines, as sports, entertainment, transport and holiday spending all achieved double-digit growth.

China's annual per capita GDP surpassed US$13,000 in 2024, yet spending on cultural and service-related consumption remains relatively low compared to countries with similar income levels. As Chinese consumers increasingly shift from basic needs to quality-of-life improvements, service consumption is set to become a key driver of the country's next phase of economic growth.

Beyond consumption, China's export sector recorded strong growth in the first half of 2025, defying rising US tariffs. Total exports exceeded 13 trillion yuan (US$1.8t), a record high for the period and a 7.2 percent year-on-year increase. While exports to the US fell sharply by 9.9 percent in line with expectations, exports to major traditional markets such as Japan, South Korea and the EU continued to grow. The biggest surprises came from emerging markets, as exports to Africa rose by 14.4 percent, to Central Asia by 13.8 percent and to ASEAN countries, China's largest trading partner, by 14.3 percent.

Another major highlight is the rapid expansion of the high-tech manufacturing sector. Value-added output in equipment manufacturing and high-tech manufacturing rose by 10.2 percent and 9.5 percent year-on-year, well above the 6.8 percent growth recorded across all industrial enterprises.

In terms of products, output of 3D printing devices surged by 43.1 percent, while new energy vehicles and industrial robots saw increases of 36.2 percent and 35.6 percent, highlighting the sector's strong momentum.

This trend is also evident in trade figures. China's exports of high-tech products rose 9.2 percent, marking nine consecutive months of growth. Exports of industrial robots alone jumped 61.5 percent, while high-end machine tools, ships, offshore engineering equipment, lithium batteries and wind turbines all recorded growth rates exceeding 20 percent.

These gains have significantly strengthened China's role in the global manufacturing and equipment supply chain, suggesting that the country's push to upgrade its industrial base is making solid progress.

As countries around the world brace for intensified trade tensions, China's economic growth has demonstrated remarkable resilience, outpacing that of most major economies. With domestic demand on the rise, export markets becoming more diverse and technology driving industrial transformation, China continues to serve as a key pillar of global economic stability.★

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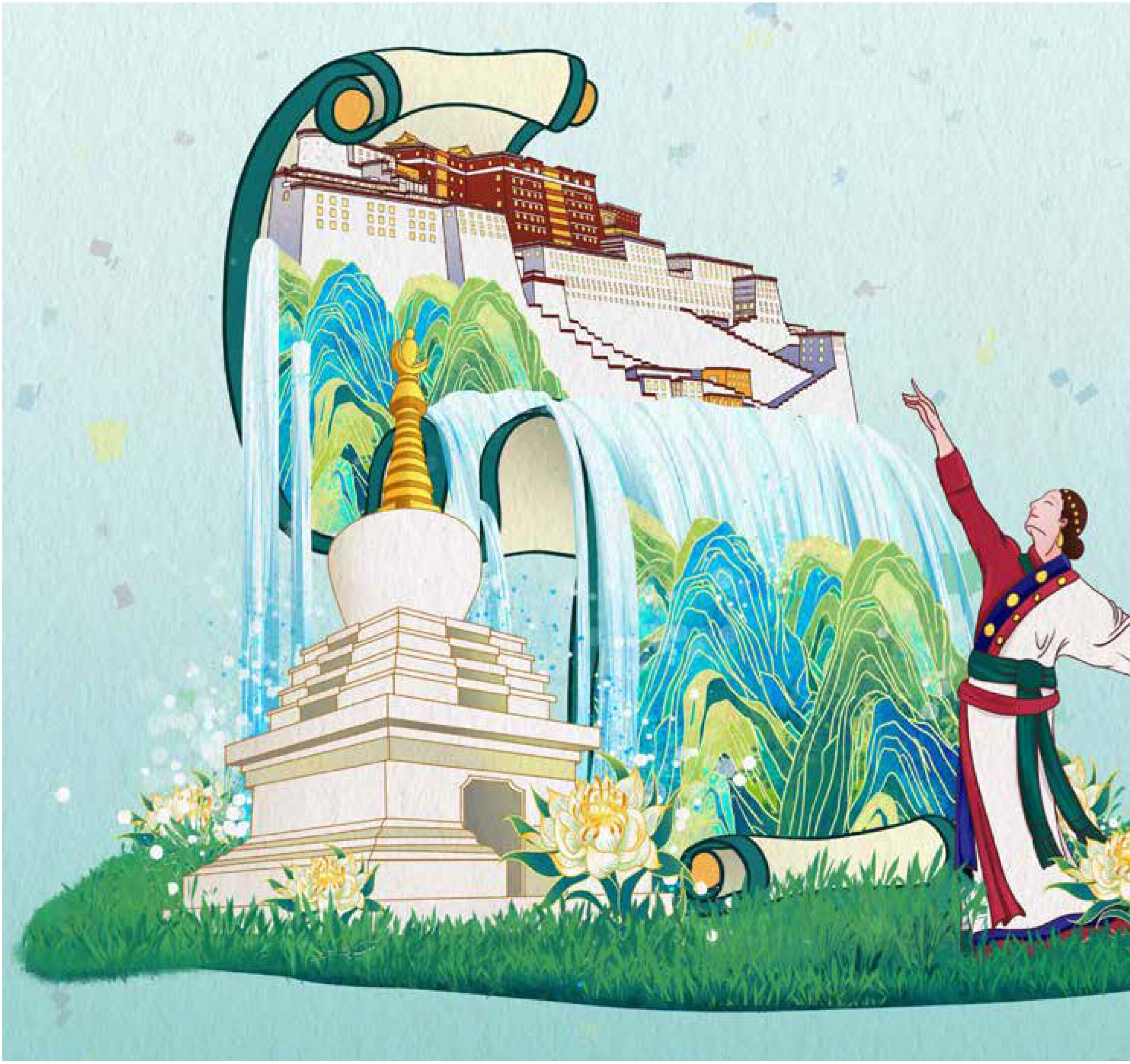

# Peak Culture

*ChinaReport* delves into the artistic, architectural and linguistic traditions of Xizang Autonomous Region to see how they are engaging new generations

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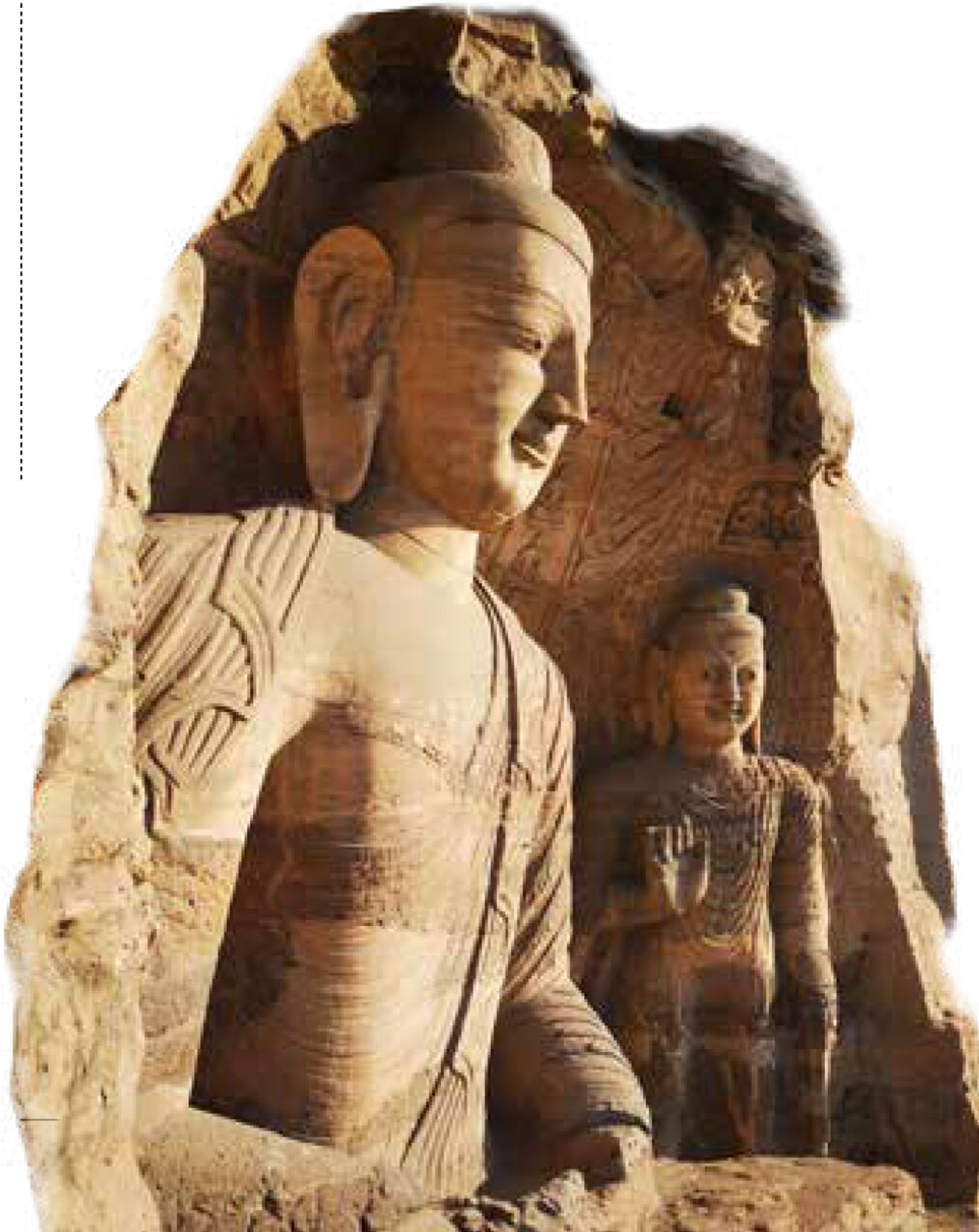

1. A view of Earth at a distance of 590,000 kilometres captured by China's asteroid probe Tianwen-2 on May 30, 2025.
The image was released by the China National Space Administration on July 1
(Photo by VCG)

2. Locals and tourists browse a night market with more than 600 food stalls over 10,000 square metres in Zhengding, Shijiazhuang, capital of Hebei Province, June 22, 2025
(Photo by VCG)

3. Yang Shaoshuai, captain of the Mountain Sea Team of China Agricultural University, checks the condition of a humanoid robot before the Robo League football tournament finals in Beijing on June 28 (Photo by VCG)

4. An exterior view of Mianhua Tiankeng Bookshop, which is built on a cliff in Luocheng, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, July 1, 2025
(Photo by IC)

5. Models participate in a fashion show at Prince Gong's Palace Museum in Beijing, July 14, 2025. The site dates back about 240 years
(Photo by VCG)

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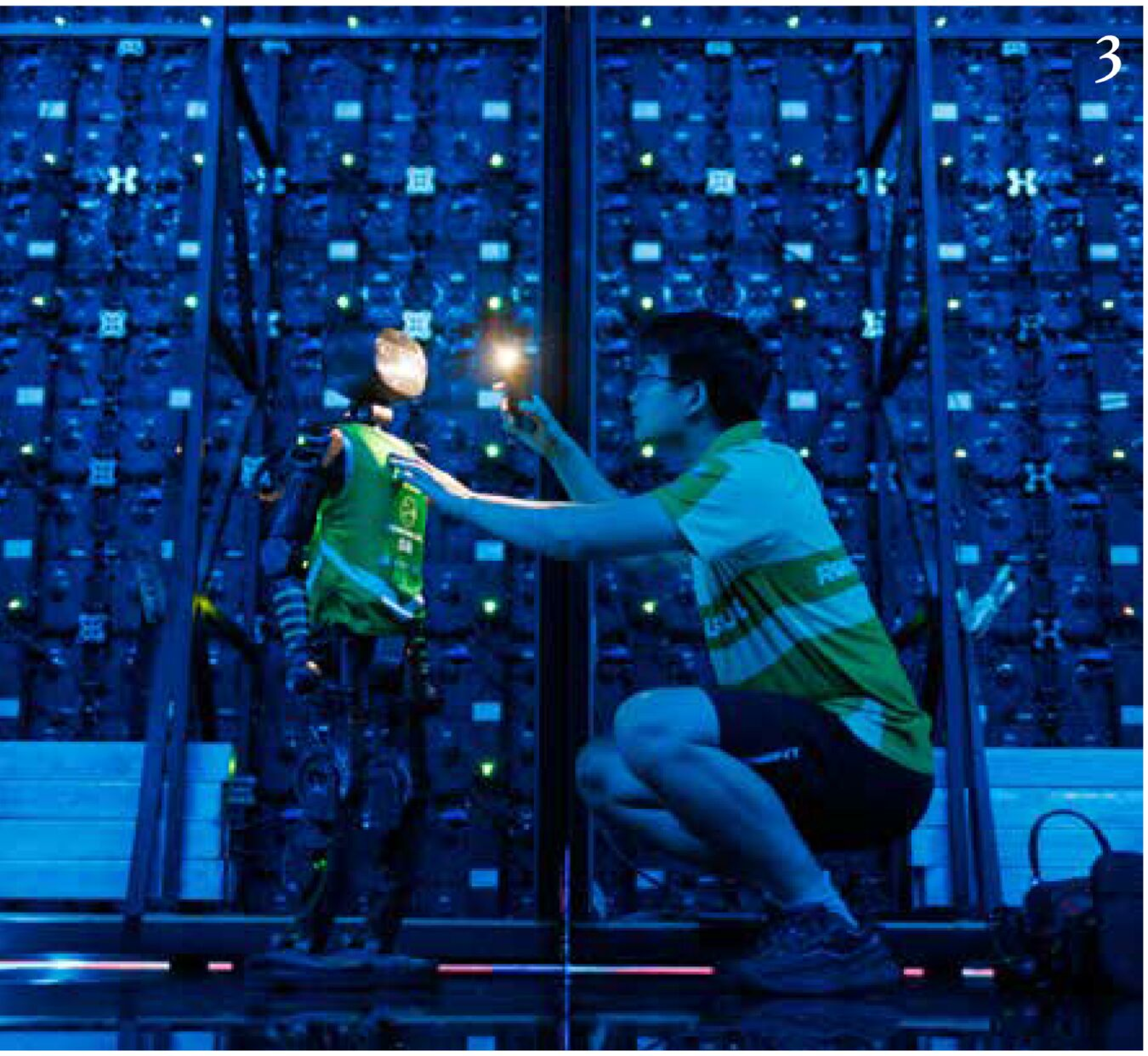

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韩记爆肚
麻辣拌
上海生煎
大猪蹄子
鲜榨橙汁
烤猪蹄
烤羊腿
肉夹馍
新疆烧烤
锅巴土豆
生煎包
愤怒大鱿鱼
上海生
手工卷凉皮
来个卷凉皮
纸包鱼
纸包虾 肥肠鸡 花蛤鸡
胡岛主
肥肠鸡 大虾鸡 花蛤鸡
榴莲芝士饼
乡思豆花铺
大鱿鱼
黄金馍片夹
辣拌串
剪刀土豆
叫花鸡 叫花小肘 叫花猪蹄
壮哥大油边

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書店

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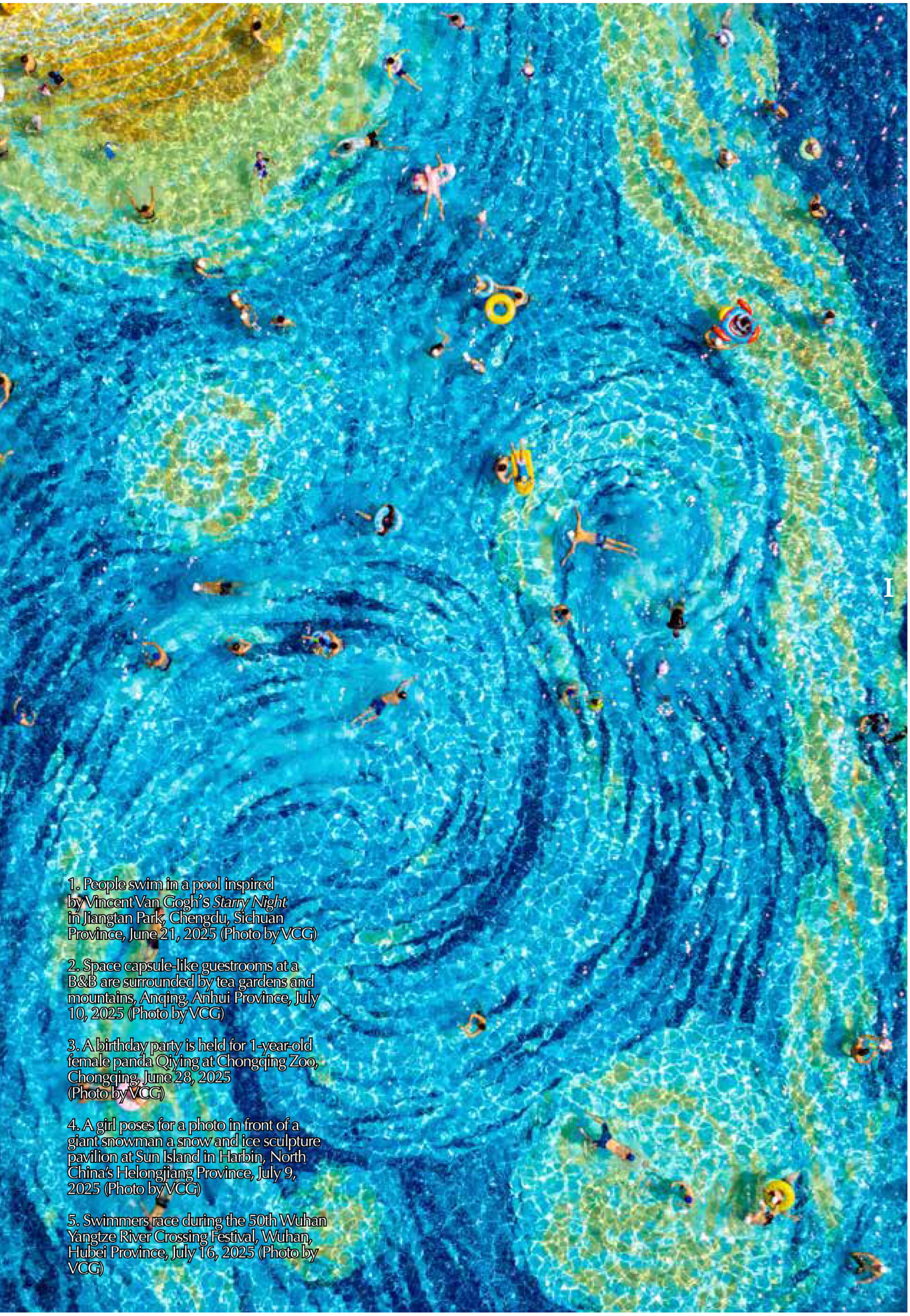
府王恭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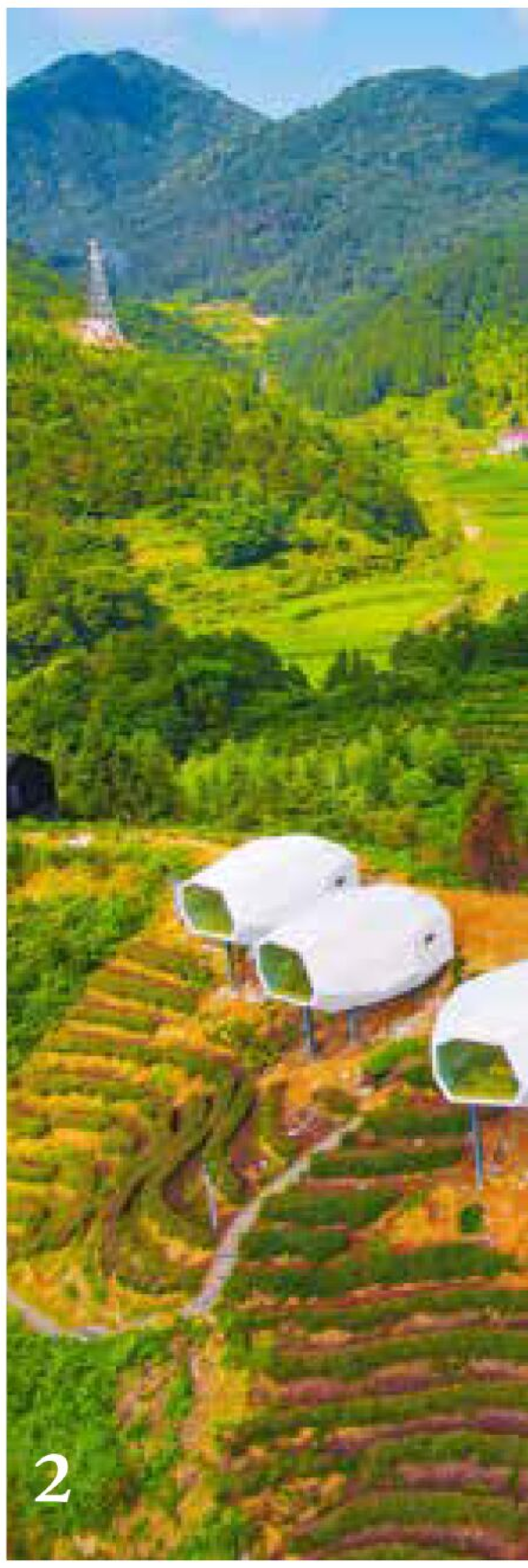
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1. People swim in a pool inspired by Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* in Jiangtan Park, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, June 21, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

2. Space capsule-like guestrooms at a B&B are surrounded by tea gardens and mountains, Anqing, Anhui Province, July 10, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. A birthday party is held for 1-year-old female panda Qiying at Chongqing Zoo, Chongqing, June 28, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. A girl poses for a photo in front of a giant snowman a snow and ice sculpture pavilion at Sun Island in Harbin, North China's Helongjiang Province, July 9, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

5. Swimmers race during the 50th Wuhan Yangtze River Crossing Festival, Wuhan, Hubei Province, July 16, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

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### Costly College Application Consultations Reflect Social Anxieties

**China Newsweek** June 13, 2025

Splashing out at least 10,000 yuan (US$1,393) on consultations for college applications for their children, parents' anxieties are a reflection of prevalent social worries about education and employment. Since 2014, college applicants have been urged to prioritise their preferred major, instead of applying for certain colleges. This is supposed to nudge students towards learning what they love. But influenced by the unregulated college consultancy sector, combined with mounting employment pressure, applicants and their parents flock to popular courses, producing many graduates with the same knowledge, leading to a high labour surplus in some fields. To support students of marginalised majors, many universities offered joint degrees, only to find it increased study burdens. Today, more students from the Chinese mainland opt for universities in Hong Kong, although they find it hard to adapt to the independent study style there. Experts suggest that while responding to labour market demands, universities should look beyond merely supplying what they believe the labour market wants.

### Market Watchdog Curbs China's Automobile Price War

**Caijing Magazine** June 23, 2025

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology announced on May 31 that the price war among the country's new energy vehicle (NEV) firms should come to an end as no manufacturers can win out amid the vicious competition. The warning was issued as the price-slashing strategies adopted by NEV makers have overwhelmed the domestic market where the profits are squeezed. In the first quarter of this year, NEV production and sales grew by 50.4 and 47.1 percent, but the profit rate of the entire industry was only 3.9 percent. The low margins have put pressure on inventories and hindered research and development. Meanwhile, it also risks the financial fluidity of the automakers whose debts are mounting. Experts suggest domestic automakers should learn from overseas experience, such as Toyota's "lean production" and Tesla's mega-casting manufacturing processes, to reduce inventory and enhance competitiveness.

### Innovative and High-Tech Industries May Boost China's Stock Core Assets

**Weekly on Stocks** July 5, 2025

New industries such as artificial intelligence and green energies listed on China's A-share markets are expected to boost stocks' core assets in the second half of this year. Although the returns on equity in some emerging industries like robot manufacturing remain lower than traditional blue-chip stocks such as fossil fuels and high-end alcohol brands, the former is expected to trigger huge growth as mass production expands. With a strong competitive edge and a huge market, China's "Prominent 10" private enterprises listed by Goldman Sachs are essential to maintaining share prices. Meanwhile, in the new consumption sector, stock prices in the IP-driven collectible designer Pop Mart grew by 197.38 percent in H1 2025. In Hong Kong, the IPOs of Chinese mainland enterprises hit a record high by June 30. Looking ahead, economists expect a compound growth model with both the old and new blue chips reshaping core assets in the market.

### Criminals Lure Students with Fraudulent Intern Opportunities

**Fangyuan Magazine**
June 15, 2025

As the availability of internship positions for university students has contracted, fraudulent practices have increased, with criminals luring naive students desperate to find a position into committing illegal offences. Some pay a lot of money for a fake proof of internship certificate, others believe they are doing a sales job and provide their bank details and ID cards, only to find they are used in fraud or money laundering. Sometimes, they are offered remote work, only to find that fraudulent agents have colluded with company staff to charge them for the positions without employers' knowledge. In most of these online scams, ignorance of the law has seen students become criminal accomplices. Although courts often show lenience to these hoodwinked students, experts said more stringent oversight in the internship market is needed, as well as thorough education to spread legal awareness in educational institutions.

### Holiday Rental Business Revived under Rural Cultural Exploration

**Oriental Outlook**
June 26, 2025

As part of the country's rural development plan, the holiday rental economy in China is seeing a resurgence in popularity as it diversifies its business model. After a decade of price wars due to identical development of rural homestays, now there are some 300,000 holiday rentals. Operators have realised that guests prefer a distinctive experience that allows exploration of local culture and customs, which has encouraged official recognition of the sector. Owners now provide tailored services for different age categories, highlight rural ways of life, offer local cuisines and demonstrate their daily lives by staying with their guests. Given the booming industry, many young people have moved from cities back to rural areas to work in these lucrative family businesses. The unique rural life also attracts foreign tourists. Experts believe that provided indigenous legacies are well preserved, holiday rentals can maintain a strong competitive edge in the tourism industry.

**"In recent years, China's GDP per capita has come very close to the World Bank's threshold for high-income countries, but has not yet reached it. This indicates the risk of the middle-income trap... At this stage, we must emphasise maintaining a moderate growth rate for the next five years. An annual target of 5 percent is ideal in the next five years, while 4 percent should be seen as the bottom line if we are to reach our development goals."**

**Liu Shijin**, former deputy director of the Development Research Centre of the State Council, writing for the *China Economic Times* in June

**"From the perspective of government funding, the US's withdrawal [from the Paris Agreement and the Network of Green Financial System] has had little impact on sustainable finance. Countries and regions like China can play a bigger role and make greater efforts in standards setting, information disclosure, carbon markets development, as well as in credit enhancement and capacity building to better mobilise social and private capital to support sustainable investment against climate change."**

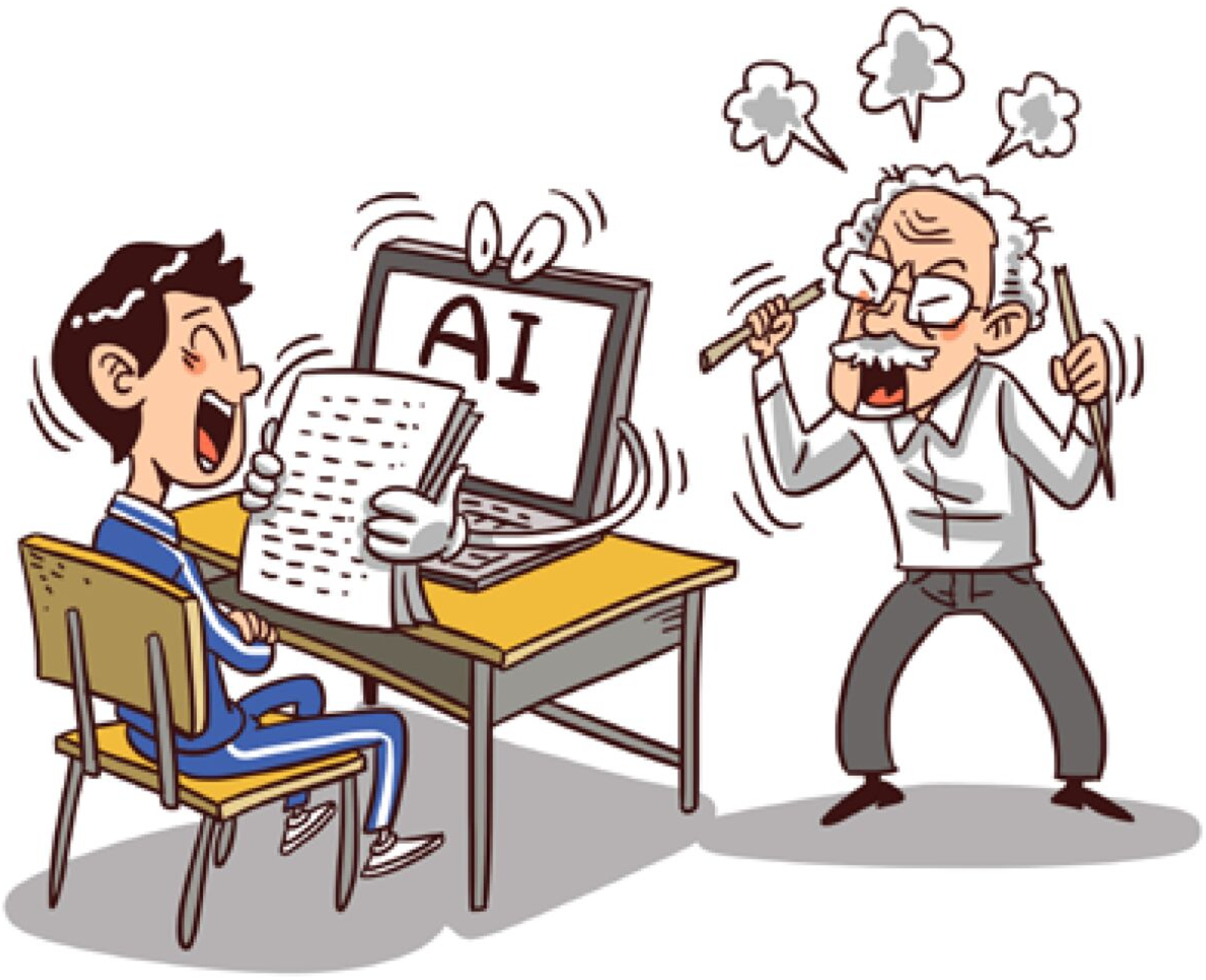
**Ma Jun**, director of the Beijing-based Institute of Finance and Sustainability (IFS), writing for magazine *China Finance* in June

**"Some recent commentary has tried to downplay the importance of boosting consumption by questioning whether a 'consumption-driven' model even exists, or by making misleading comparisons... But when raised during a critical policy window, they risk reawakening the bureaucratic inertia for infrastructure-led investment, potentially leading to more inefficient or ineffective spending, further distorting demand structure and wasting public resources."**

**Teng Tai**, director of private non-profit organisation the WANB Institute, writing on its official WeChat account in June

**"After 80 years, we are once again seeing the return of traditional security threats and the persistence of war and conflict. China's 80th anniversary [of victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War] offers the world an opportunity to come together and reflect on how to realise an effective and long-lasting security framework that truly ensures peace."**

**Liu Jianchao**, minister of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, responding to a question from The Paper at the 13th World Peace Forum in Beijing on July 3



"When students treat AI tools as 'automatic writers' or 'answering machines,' it reflects a misunderstanding of both the technology and the nature of education. The real value of AI in education should be its ability to inspire curiosity, critical thinking and communication skills."

**Liu Hong**, researcher at the Fudan Development Institute, writing for Shanghai-based publication *Social Sciences Weekly* in June

"In the future, the international monetary system may continue evolving to where a few major currencies coexist, compete and balance one another... Promoting the special drawing right (SDR, international reserve assets maintained by the International Monetary Fund) as a leading international currency would require strong political consensus among member states, which is difficult under current global conditions... We could work towards more regular SDR issuances and encourage participation from the private sector and market entities to expand the SDR's use in international trade, finance and investment..."

**Pan Gongsheng**, governor of the People's Bank of China (PBoC), speaking at the 2025 Lujiazui Forum in Shanghai in June

"Employment data shows that young people (especially university graduates) face big difficulties. Many are underemployed, working jobs below their expertise or are overworked. Since the end of the pandemic, employment confidence index has not risen in line with the unemployment rate back to the historical average. In fact, it has continued to fall and remains below pre-2022 levels."

**Sun Mingchun**, deputy chairman of the Chinese Financial Association of Hong Kong and **Chen Weixuan**, senior researcher at Tencent Research Institute, writing for financial publication *Yi Magazine* in June

"Writers should not limit themselves to rigid ideas about the market. The belief that 'audiences only want popular themes' actually comes from writers' own limited perspectives."

Screenwriter **Li Xiao**, speaking at a forum during the 2025 Shanghai Television Festival in late June

## Global Civilisations Dialogue Advocates Diversity, Shared Values

The Global Civilisation Dialogue Ministerial Meeting was held in Beijing from July 10 to 11, a showcase to call attention to the importance of diversity and respect for shared values among civilisations.

Themed "Safeguarding Diversity of Human Civilisations for World Peace and Development," the meeting, hosted by the Publicity Department and the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, attracted over 600 guests from 140 countries and regions.

Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message to the meeting, stressing that the world is, in nature, a place of diverse civilisations, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

"History shows that exchanges and mutual learning among civilisations are essential for civilisations to flourish and for human progress to be made," Xi said, adding that "there is an ever-pressing need for civilisations to transcend estrangement through exchanges, and to transcend clashes through mutual learning."

Xi said that China is ready to work with other countries to uphold the vision of equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness between civilisations, act on the Global Civilisation Initiative, promote the building of a global network for dialogue and cooperation among civilisations, and inject new impetus into the progress of human civilisation and the peace and development of the world. Xi hopes that participating representatives will engage in in-depth exchanges to build consensus and contribute their wisdom and strength to the goal of promoting understanding and friendship among peoples of different countries and achieving harmonious coexistence among different civilisations.

Cai Qi, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and member of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee, built on Xi's message in his speech at the opening ceremony. He said that China's Global Civilisation Initiative which President Xi proposed two years ago has received an enthusiastic response and active support from the international community. He pointed out that the Global Civilisation Initiative is rooted in fine traditional Chinese culture and that its core essence is to seek common ground while reserving differences and to achieve harmonious coexistence, echoing the multicultural integration and coexistence philosophies held by many countries around the world.

During the two-day event, six parallel sub-forums were held where participants discussed the importance of exchanges among different civilisations and how to advance technological innovations to build a more inclusive world and promote global development.

Some of the delegates visited Zhejiang Province, which leads the country in high-tech and green development, and Shandong Province where the prominent Chinese philosopher Confucius was born.

At the end of the two-day event, the delegations issued a joint declaration, agreeing to maintain the diversity of different civilisations and increase exchanges and cooperation to promote mutual equality and respect.

According to the Foreign Ministry of China, former Indonesian president Megawati Soekarnoputri, former Namibian president Nangolo Mbumba, former Japanese prime minister Yukio Hatoyama and former Belgian prime minister Yves Leterme delivered speeches at the meeting, agreeing with the notion that respecting the diversity of civilisations and jointly promoting world peace and development are major issues concerning the future and destiny of humanity.

## Deep Space Exploration Organisation to Promote International Collaboration

A new international academic organisation to promote space exploration was launched in Hefei, Anhui Province on July 7.

The International Deep Space Exploration Association (IDSEA), the first global scientific organisation focused on studying deep space initiatives, is a collaboration led by China's National Space Administration and other domestic and international agencies. Its scope includes studying lunar exploration, interplanetary exploration and planetary defence, as well as trends in deep space exploration and future technological paths.

Wu Weiren, general designer of China's lunar exploration project and an academia at the Chinese Academy of Engineering, was chosen as the first chairman. He told Xinhua News Agency that IDSEA is vital for Chinese scientists to communicate and cooperate with international scientists and is a remarkable step for global collaboration in deep space exploration.

China provides several platforms for international cooperation in space exploration. In April, China announced that seven institutions from six countries have been authorised to study lunar surface samples brought back by China's Chang'e-5 mission in 2020, and China has invited global partners to cooperate in its Mars Tianwen-3 sample-return mission, which is expected to launch around 2028.

## Campaign Against Smuggling Strategic Minerals Strengthened

China is conducting a nationwide campaign against the illegal export of strategic minerals, according to a Ministry of Commerce press conference on July 10.

For the sake of national security and State interests, in 2024 China tightened export controls on strategic minerals like rare earths, tungsten and graphite, which are important for many high-tech industries like semiconductors, renewable energy and defence manufacturing. China has major reserves of strategic minerals and dominates their processing and supply. Data from the International Energy Agency showed that China possessed more than 60 percent of rare earth reserves in 2023 and controlled over 90 percent of their processing. The tightened export controls have caused price rises on the global market which in turn has driven an increase in smuggling.

Strategic minerals can be smuggled by faking customs reports, melting rare earths into steel beams, or by reselling after the minerals are exported to a middle country with less strict export controls. The latest campaign will focus on the key links and target underground smuggling chains and networks.

## Myanmar-based Family Crime Syndicate Indicted for Fraud, Trafficking, Extortion

Prosecutors in Shenzhen, South China's Guangdong Province, have formally indicted key members of a notorious crime syndicate that operated in northern Myanmar's Kokang. Charges against 21 suspects of the Bai family crime gang, including ringleaders Bai Suocheng (Bay Saw Chain) and his son Bai Yingcang (Bay Yin Chin), cover fraud, gambling, extortion, homicide, kidnapping and drug trafficking.

Members of the Bai syndicate held great political sway in Kokang, as well as employing up to 2,000 armed militiamen, allowing them to operate 41 large-scale gambling and telecom scam compounds where many other crime gangs paid them to run their own illegal activities. This included coercing Chinese nationals, confining them in the compounds and forcing them to work in the telecom scam industry through violence and abuse.

Prosecutors said the suspects were involved in more than 31,000 cases and allegedly caused the deaths of six Chinese nationals. Questionable money related to scams exceeded 10.6 billion yuan (US$1.5b) and that from illegal gambling exceeded 18 billion yuan (US$2.6b).

Chinese and Myanmar police have apprehended more than 57,000 Chinese suspects since China's Ministry of Public Security launched a targetted campaign in 2023 against gangs involved in transnational crime.

On July 4, China, Myanmar and Thailand convened the second ministerial-level meeting on cracking down on transnational telecom and cyber scams to further strengthen regional cooperation against organised crime rings, especially those based in Myanmar's border areas that primarily target Chinese nationals.

## UNESCO Lists Xixia Mausoleums on World Heritage List

The Xixia Imperial Tombs, an archaeological site in Yinchuan, capital of Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List at the 47th session of the World Heritage Committee held on July 11.

Located at the foot of the Helan Mountains, the tombs were built by the Tangut, an ethnic group that thrived in northwest China between the 11th and 13th centuries. The necropolis site for high-ranking members of the Western Xia Dynasty (1038-1227) covers 40 square kilometres, and includes nine emperors' mausoleums and 271 satellite tombs, as well as 32 flood prevention sites.

Experts said the site is the biggest and best preserved remnants of the dynasty, and offers direct testament for the Kingdom of Xia which they believe was a unique civilisation that combined Tibetan Buddhist, Tangut and Han Chinese influences.

The listing lifts the number of World Heritage sites in China to 60.

## Tax Preferences Extended for Foreign Investors to Reinvesting in Key Sectors

Chinese finance authorities are extending preferential tax credit policies for foreigners who reinvest their profits in the country, offering tax exemptions on 10 percent of the amount reinvested.

The Ministry of Finance, State Taxation Administration and Ministry of Commerce announced the policy on June 30 that will benefit foreign investors who reinvest profits earned in China from January 1, 2025 to December 31, 2028. The tax credit can be used to reduce other taxable liabilities, and unused amounts can be carried forward. The investment must be locked in for at least five years.

The policy aims to encourage long-term investment in industries on the national list announced in 2022, where foreign investment is encouraged. A new list is expected to be released within the year, with more support for priority areas, such as advanced manufacturing, green industries, modern agriculture and the digital and high-tech sectors, according to the National Development and Reform Commission.

Experts said the new policy will help attract long-term foreign investment and further improve and stabilise the country's investment environment.

# ‘Gold Digger’ Revenge Game Strikes Nerve Over Gender Stereotypes

A live-action video game targetting “gold diggers” has ignited fierce debate on Chinese social media over gender representation.

Released on June 19, *Emotional Anti-Fraud Simulator*, originally titled *Revenge on Gold Diggers*, the game targets women who manipulate romantic relationships to financially exploit men.

Created primarily by Hong Kong filmmaker Mark Wu and designers Qianfang Studio, players take on the role of a male character who helps a heartbroken friend exact revenge on women that have emotionally and financially defrauded him.

The game quickly shot to the top of China’s charts on major gaming platform Steam, surpassing the hit title *Black Myth: Wukong*. Controversy followed almost immediately. Supporters, mostly male players, praised the game for portraying what they see as the harsh realities of modern relationships. Some argued that “gold diggers” are a real and growing concern, and the game serves as a warning by highlighting their tactics.

Critics, however, accused the game of misogyny, saying it reinforces harmful stereotypes by painting all women as potential scammers, and that this is purely a female phenomenon. While the game presents itself as taking on emotional manipulation, many believe it does so by vilifying women in general, further fuelling distrust between genders.

Responding to the backlash, the creators denied any intent to target women. On June 30, Mark Wu posted a handwritten letter on the game’s official forum, stating: “The reason I created this story is to fight against emotional fraud and to deliver the message: ‘Love yourself first. Only when you know how to protect yourself can you protect your love.’”

## Netizen Comments:

- “I’ve played the game. I don’t think it incites gender conflict or deepens mistrust between men and women. Instead, it teaches players to approach love more rationally. I believe the intention is educational.”
- “The creators clearly used gender issues as a marketing tool. By choosing the derogatory term ‘gold diggers’ and focusing on isolated cases of fraud, they’ve unfairly targetted women as a whole.”
- “The heated discussion around this game shows just how much trust in love and marriage has already collapsed. Men and women alike are growing cynical and suspicious towards relationships.”

*Source: Zhihu, Sina Weibo*

## Media Comments:

***Beijing Youth Daily*, a Beijing-based newspaper:** “Through interactive storytelling, the game vividly illustrates the traps of modern dating, including emotional manipulation, blackmail and fraud. It serves as a lively and effective anti-fraud lesson, allowing young people to learn through gameplay and build resistance to emotional scams.”

*Source: official website*

**Jimu News, a Wuhan-based outlet under *Hubei Daily*:** “In the name of exposing emotional fraud, the game reduces complex social issues to a gender war, generalising women as scammers. Its message board has devolved into a platform for outright misogyny.”

*Source: official website*

**Zhang Shule, gaming industry critic:** “The game’s popularity stems from the creators’ deliberate mixing of social issues into its storyline. They clearly anticipated controversy, knowing it would drive public discussion and boost the game’s visibility.”

*Source: Southern Metropolis Daily*

# Low Gaokao Score Party Triggers Testy Response

June 24 marked a nerve-wracking day for millions of Chinese families as scores for the *gaokao*, China's national college entrance exam, were released. But one family's unexpected reaction to their daughter's score ignited widespread debate.

Douyin user "Sister Lan" of Zhoukou, Henan Province, posted several videos on June 25 showing her family celebrating her 19-year-old daughter's score: 288 out of 750. The score is far below Henan's undergraduate admissions threshold of 471. But for this family, it was a moment of joy. According to the mother, this was the highest score her daughter had ever achieved.

In one video that saw over one million likes, Sister Lan tells her daughter: "Over the past 15 years, I've always been proud of your scores, whether high or low. What makes me truly happy is having a healthy and joyful child." The video was later shared by State-run *People's Daily* on its official Douyin account, quoting the mother's words.

Many netizens praised the family for their refreshing perspective, arguing that the mother's response challenged the traditional exam-driven mindset and reinforced the idea that academic scores do not define a person's worth. Others, however, were critical. They argued that a score that low celebrated a lack of effort and disrespected students who had worked tirelessly. Some suggested the videos were staged for attention, as Sister Lan is already an influencer with over 183,000 followers on Douyin.

# INFLUENCER

## Chua Lam

On June 25, Chua Lam, Hong Kong writer, food critic and film producer, passed away at the age of 83. A cultural icon in the Chinese-speaking world, Chua's legacy is not only remembered through his work but also his signature carpe-diem attitude towards life.

Born in Singapore in 1941, Chua studied in Japan before settling in Hong Kong in the 1960s. A true renaissance man, he was a film director and producer, columnist, author, calligrapher, painter and a passionate connoisseur of food. His influence on Hong Kong's cultural landscape was immense, earning him the distinction of being one of the "Four Greatest Talents of Hong Kong" alongside novelist Jin Yong (Louis Cha Leung-yung), science fiction writer Ni Kuang, and lyricist James Wong Jim. Chua was the last surviving member of the group.

Over a career spanning more than three decades, Chua authored over 200 books, many of which focused on cuisine, culinary culture and restaurant reviews. He was also a familiar face on food-related television shows, appearing as a host and consultant. In 2018, he co-founded the restaurant brand "Chua Lam's Dim Sum," which now has over 100 locations across China.

In a similar vein to food personality Anthony Bourdain, Chua was known for his embrace of a "live life to the fullest" mindset, savouring the present and finding joy in life's simple pleasures. Admirers praised his laid-back, pleasure-filled lifestyle. However, some critics viewed him as hedonistic, arguing that his outlook was shaped by a level of fame and wealth that most people could not realistically achieve.

## High Fidelity: Marriage Booths Pop Up at Music Festivals

In an initiative to boost marriage rates, a local government in Northwest China set up a civil registration booth at a music festival that allowed couples to tie the knot on the spot.

Music lovers at the Super Strawberry Music Festival on July 12 and 13 in Shuimogou District of Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region could marry by just providing valid ID cards and taking three portrait photos for their marriage certificate.

In the past two months, other city governments have also offered marriage registration services at music festivals, such as Chengdu, Sichuan Province and Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, the latter of which saw 10 couples get hitched.

The trend follows a recent revision of China's Marriage Registration Ordinance that allows couples to marry at any authorised location nationwide without needing to return to their household registration location.

The policy has generated a chorus of support online, where supporters praised it for the convenience and helping modernise a typically bureaucratic procedure and bring a fresh, festive touch to what should be a memorable life event. However, critics sounded off, saying that the emotional highs of a music festival might lead some to make impulsive decisions they may later regret.

Trade Wars

# Global Realignment

## China has fortified its relationships with trade partners around the globe as US President Donald Trump makes new tariff threats

By Yu Xiaodong

On the sidelines of the ASEAN Plus foreign ministers' meetings held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on July 11, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Both Wang and Rubio described their first meeting in person as "constructive," emphasising the importance of managing their differences and expanding cooperation in relevant fields.

In a round of talks held in Geneva and London in May and June, China and the US reached a temporary truce in the trade war as both countries scaled back tariffs and export controls on certain products. But beneath the uneasy peace, trade tensions between the two countries are far from defused.

In July, US President Donald Trump showed renewed appetite for tariffs, sending tariff letters to dozens of countries, including ASEAN members and many long-standing US allies such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Mexico and Canada. He threatened yet again to impose sweeping hikes of 20 to 50 percent unless they offer major concessions in talks with the US before August.

By contrast, China is stepping up diplomatic efforts to fortify ties with trade partners around the globe from Southeast Asia to Europe and the Gulf to the Pacific, positioning itself as a more reliable and pragmatic partner.

### ASEAN Countries

Six ASEAN member states were among the first 14 countries to receive Trump's tariff letters, facing some of the steepest proposed rates. Malaysia and Indonesia have been threatened with tariffs of 25 percent and 32 percent, Thailand and Cambodia with 36 percent, and Laos and Myanmar with up to 40 percent.

Trump has also threatened an additional 10 percent tariff on any country "aligned' with the BRICS group. This could impact several ASEAN countries including Indonesia, which became a full BRICS member in January, as well as Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, all BRICS partner nations.

"Across the world, tools once used to generate growth are now wielded to pressure, isolate and contain," said Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, this year's ASEAN chair, at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 9. "As we navigate external pressures, we need to fortify our foundations, trade among ourselves, invest more in one another."

Meanwhile, China and ASEAN are elevating economic ties. In late May, China and ASEAN announced the conclusion of negotiations for the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 upgrade, set to be signed in October. The agreement expands cooperation beyond traditional goods to include the digital economy, green energy and cross-border investment.

China and ASEAN countries are also strengthening political ties on some sensitive issues, which will lay a good foundation for closer business ties. During his visit to Kuala Lumpur, Wang reaffirmed China's support for regional stability and deeper integration, and expressed China's willingness to sign the Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, also known as the Bangkok Treaty.

Signed by the 10 ASEAN states in 1995, the Bangkok Treaty aimed to ensure that Southeast Asia remains free of nuclear weapons. All five nuclear-weapons states under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, namely the US, Russia, China, the UK and France, are invited to sign a protocol pledging to respect the zone and not to use or threaten to use nuclear

Performers act in a fruit-themed musical during an event promoting the fruit industry under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, June 28, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Buyers browse African-made bags at the fourth China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo in Changsha, Hunan Province, June 12,2025 (Photo by VCG)

weapons against parties to the treaty. China is the only one that has expressed willingness to sign it without reservations so far.

In addition, China is accelerating consultations with ASEAN countries on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, Wang said on July 11 at the ASEAN Plus foreign ministers' meetings. In a briefing on July 12, Wang, also also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, told media that both sides agreed to conclude the consultations and reach agreement on the Code of Conduct as scheduled next year, which is expected to be effective, substantive and consistent with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

## Japan, South Korea and Australia

Wang also met with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts during the ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 10. In a veiled criticism of the US, Wang warned that trade wars would drive up production costs and disrupt supply chains, and called for Japan, South Korea and ASEAN countries to firmly oppose the building of "walls and barriers" and to safeguard the "lifeline" of common development.

Despite being the US's closest allies in Asia, both Japan and South Korea received letters from the Trump administration with threats of 25 percent tariffs. In response, Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba said that he won't "easily compromise" and will "protect what must be protected in talks with Washington, while South Korea said that it would intensify trade talks with the US "to reach a mutually beneficial result."

Both Japan and South Korea are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's biggest trade bloc that also includes the 10 ASEAN member states, China, Australia and New Zealand. Due to the intensifying tariff threats from the US, both countries have quietly expanded cooperation with China thanks to the low tariffs under the RCEP.

At a trilateral economic dialogue held in March, the trade ministers of the three countries agreed to "closely cooperate for comprehensive and high-level" talks on a long expected trilateral free trade agreement deal to promote "regional and global trade," according to a statement released after the meeting.

Both Prime Minister Ishiba and South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, who took office in October last year and June this year respectively, are known for adopting a more pragmatic approach towards China than their predecessors.

During a call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Lee said that he attaches great importance to South Korea-China relations and is willing to work with the Chinese side to promote friendly relations between the two countries. According to South Korean media, Lee invited the Chinese leader to visit South Korea within the year.

Trade relations between Australia, another US ally and RCEP member, and China have also improved. On July

Officials take part in a China-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Day event at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul, South Korea, May 30,2025 (Photo by VCG)

12, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese embarked on a six-day visit to China. Since taking office in 2022, Albanese has adjusted Canberra's rhetoric towards China and helped stabilise the bilateral relationship, previously strained due to Canberra's calls for an inquiry into the origins of Covid-19 in China, among other issues. China, in response, lifted trade sanctions on Australian products. In 2024, Australia had a trade surplus of US$41.5 billion with China.

Albanese's trip to China came at a sensitive time as Canberra faces greater pressure from Washington. Although Australia has a trade deficit with the US, it was still subject to a 10 percent "baseline" tariff when Trump launched his sweeping "reciprocal" tariffs in April. While Canberra was spared a tariff letter in Trump's renewed trade war, his threats to raise tariffs up to 200 percent on pharmaceuticals and a 50 percent tariff on copper imports, exposes Australia to further risks.

On July 12, the day Albanese arrived in China, the *Financial Times* reported that the US demanded that Australia and other US allies, including Japan, should clarify what role they would play if the US and China went to war over Taiwan, which caught Canberra "off guard." In response, Pat Conroy, Australia's defence industry minister said that Australia will refuse any US' request to join a "hypothetical" conflict with China over Taiwan and will not make any advance commitment.

## Wider Region

Besides regional countries in the Pacific, China has deepened cooperation with partners under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In May, the inaugural trilateral ASEAN-China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting was also held in Kuala Lumpur, which called for an accelerated free trade agreement between the three sides.

The Gulf nations council, comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has long been tightly bound to the US through security and oil ties. But it is increasingly looking East for economic partnerships and is an active participant in China's BRI, which has yielded significant dividends.

In June, the second China-Central Asia Summit was held in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan, with participants agreeing to deepen cooperation under the BRI, and particularly to accelerate progress in transcontinental land transportation and logistics infrastructure.

In April, construction on the Kyrgyzstan section of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway broke ground, marking a major development in the landmark project that will greatly enhance infrastructure connectivity among the three countries.

In July, Chinese Premier Li Qiang attended the BRICS summit held in Brazil, calling on the bloc to become the vanguard in advancing global governance reform. During Li's trip, China and Brazil signed numerous cooperation documents in fields including infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, new energy, artificial intelligence (AI) and development strategy alignment.

Brazil now faces the highest tariffs among countries that received a tariff letter from the Trump administration, which threatened to raise tariffs on Brazilian products to 50 percent from 10 percent on August 1.

China has also sought to improve ties with the European Union, which now faces a 30 percent tariff from the US on August 1. The two sides have conducted frequent diplomatic interactions in recent months. However, given the disputes regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China's rare earth export controls and the EU's tariff on electronic vehicles remain thorny issues, it is unclear how far China-EU cooperation can go.

In response to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's remarks that rebalancing the EU's economic relations with China should be a priority, Mao Ning, a spokesperson from China's Foreign Ministry called on the bloc to "form a more objective and rational perception of China, and pursue a more positive and pragmatic China policy."

"We hope the EU realises that what needs rebalancing at the moment is the EU's mentality, not China-EU economic and trade relations," Mao said.

By and large, China's latest efforts to diversify away from the US market have paid off. While China's goods trade with the US fell sharply by 9.3 percent in the first half of this year according to data released by the Chinese government, China's total goods trade rose to 21.79 trillion yuan (US$3t), a 2.9 percent year-on-year increase.

China's exports expanded to 13 trillion yuan (US$1.8t), a record high for the same period and a 7.2 percent year-on-year rise, despite a decline in imports. China also increased imports and exports with more than 190 countries and regions for the first half of the year. Trade with BRI countries increased by 4.7 percent and accounted for over half of China's total foreign trade. More specifically, China's exports to the EU, Africa, Central Asia and ASEAN increased by 3.5 percent, 14.4 percent, 13.8 percent and 14.3 percent respectively.

## 'Not at China's Expense'

While China seeks to deepen ties with its trade partners, it has also cautioned them against striking trade deals with the US that could undermine Chinese interests. As Beijing's firm stance has pressured the Trump administration into rolling back tariffs on Chinese goods, Washington now appears to be using tariff threats more aggressively to push its trade partners away from Chinese supply chains and investment.

So far, only the UK and Vietnam have successfully concluded trade negotiations with Washington, each securing a deal that imposes a 20 percent tariff on their exports to the US. However, both agreements have come under scrutiny for reportedly including "poison pill" clauses designed to restrict deeper trade engagement with China.

In May, Beijing issued strong warnings against such a provision after the UK-US trade deal emerged. The UK responded by insisting the deal does not grant the US any veto over Chinese investment.

In June, Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng and British Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves held the China-UK Economic and Financial Dialogue in London, pledging to inject new impetus into the bilateral economic cooperation. A more recent meeting between Wang Yi and British National Security Adviser Jonathan Powell held on July 14 reaffirmed both sides' commitment to strengthening bilateral ties.

Amid Trump's renewed tariff threats, reports suggest that the US is pressuring South Korea to align with its efforts to curb China's growth in the global shipbuilding industry in exchange for reduced tariffs. On July 11, South Korea's trade policy director, Chang Sung-gil, confirmed that cooperation against China's shipbuilding sector is one of the preconditions set by the US for finalising a trade deal aimed at avoiding high reciprocal tariffs.

"China supports parties in handling economic and trade issues through dialogue and consultation, but no deals or talks should harm the interests of any third party," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a press conference on July 11.

"Sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic affairs are important principles of the UN Charter and basic norms in international relations. Tariffs should not be a tool of coercion, bullying or interference," she added.

As the Trump administration has postponed its self-imposed deadline on trade negotiations, it remains unclear how countries will react to the mounting pressures from the US for major concessions, including their relationships with China.

But China has made it clear that in contrast to the US's transactional and increasingly coercive approach, China adopts a long-term stance as a defender of multilateralism, offering continued economic access and certainty.

Speaking during the Munich Security Conference held in Germany in February, Wang Yi said that China maintains a stable and consistent foreign policy, and does not easily flip-flop or reverse the policy, which "demonstrates its strategic resolve as well as international credibility as a major country."★

# FUTURE PERFECT

Xizang shines a light on how it is preserving the old while innovating ancient techniques and developing cultural traditions to suit the demands of an advancing region

Xizang 60th Anniversary

# PAST FORWARD

## From historic temples to industrial relics, Lhasa's historical architecture is being carefully repurposed into modern cultural and artistic spaces, blending heritage with innovation

By Du Guodong and Lü Weitao

On May 18, 2025, the historic Jebum-gang Temple in the heart of Lhasa – now reimagined as the Jebum-gang Art Centre, welcomed Tibetan artist Gade's first solo exhibition in his native Xizang Autonomous Region.

The show, titled *Gade Dream Yoga*, spans 40 years of Gade's work through various mediums, retracing milestones of modern Tibetan art that have drawn recognition across the globe.

But just as significant as the region's ongoing contemporary cultural renaissance is the venue itself. "As a vital cultural hub in Lhasa's old city, Jebum-gang serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, revitalising historical heritage through innovative transformation," Fang Kun, co-founder of the Jebum-gang Art Centre, told *ChinaReport*.

Such transformations are taking place across Lhasa, where a growing number of traditional and industrial buildings, left in disrepair for decades, are being repurposed into public cultural spaces, art centres and museums.

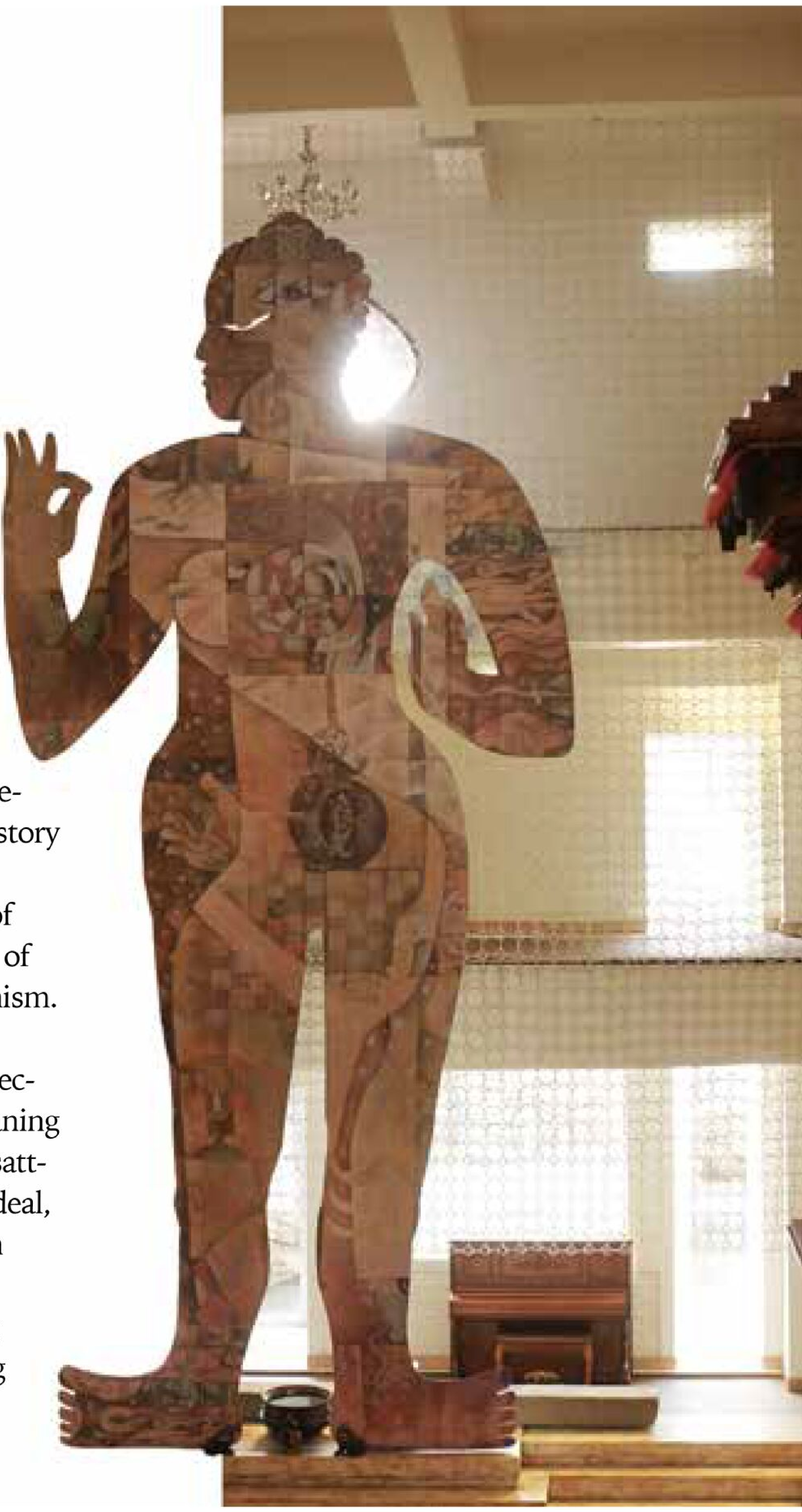
### Houses of the Holy

The Jebum-gang Art Centre is the first public cultural space in Xizang created through the adaptive reuse of a historic building.

Built in the latter half of the 19th century, Jebum-gang means "Holy Place of 100,000 Tsongkhapas" in Tibetan. This is because the site once featured a five-story stupa that housed 100,000 *tsatsas*, or small moulded clay sculptures of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism.

The structure follows a central theme in traditional Tibetan architecture – the mandala. Originally meaning "palace of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas," the mandala represents the ideal, complete and resplendent world in Buddhist cosmology.

The construction of Jebum-gang embodies this ambition. According to historical records and photos, the lower level of Jebum-gang Temple featured a large main hall equal in length on all sides. Embedded within its walls were the 100,000



**A statue of Buddha in silhouette on display at the Weland Museum of Contemporary Art, Lhasa** (Photo Courtesy of Xu Yinglong)

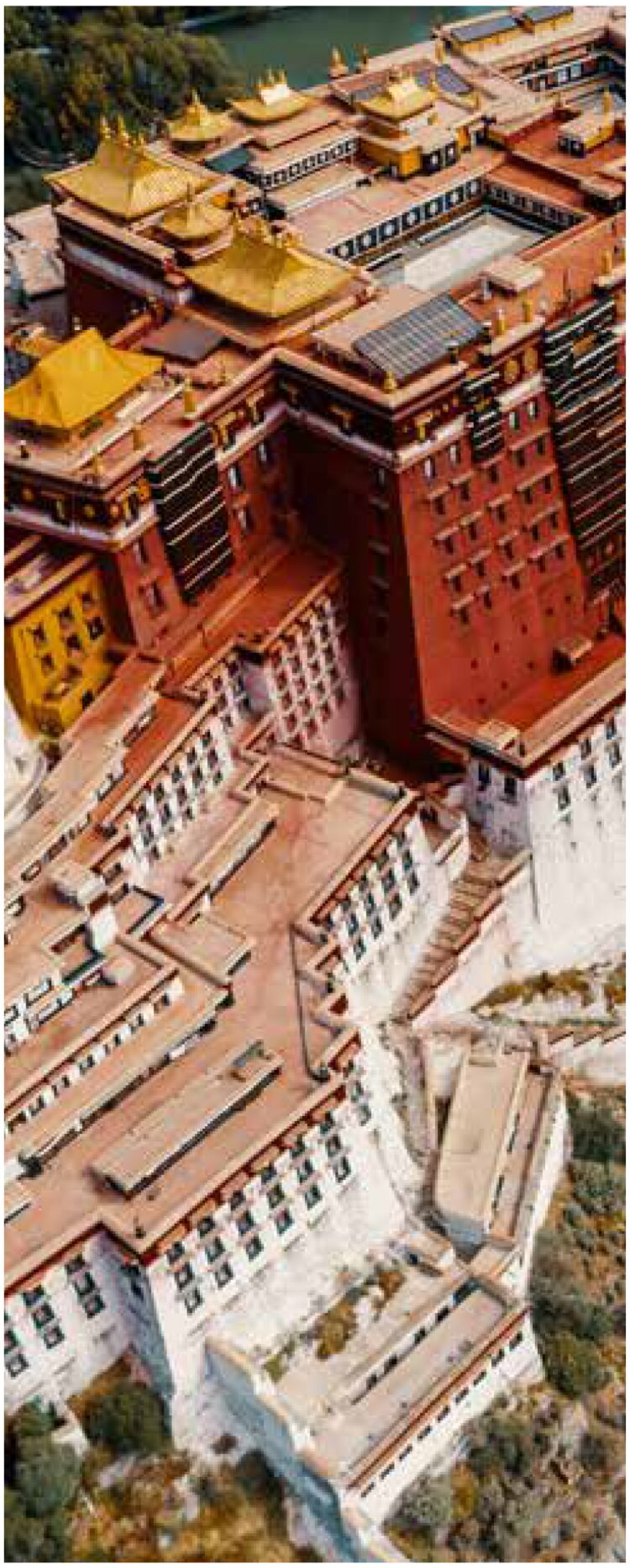
*tsatsas* salvaged from an earlier stupa on the same site that had collapsed.

Above the main hall stood nine additional shrines. The central shrine, slightly larger, housed three Buddha statues. At each of the four corners were tower-like shrines dedicated to the Four Heavenly Kings, believed to watch over each cardinal direction. Between these towers were four smaller chapels, completing the symmetrical layout.

A feature of Jebum-gang Temple is its interior murals. They convey traditional Tibetan understandings of sacred space in textbook-like detail. With dynamic compositions and refined brushwork, these murals are considered outstanding examples of late 19th century Tibetan painting.

Delving into the historical context of the temple's construction reveals that these systematically arranged murals also held a deep functional significance during wartime.

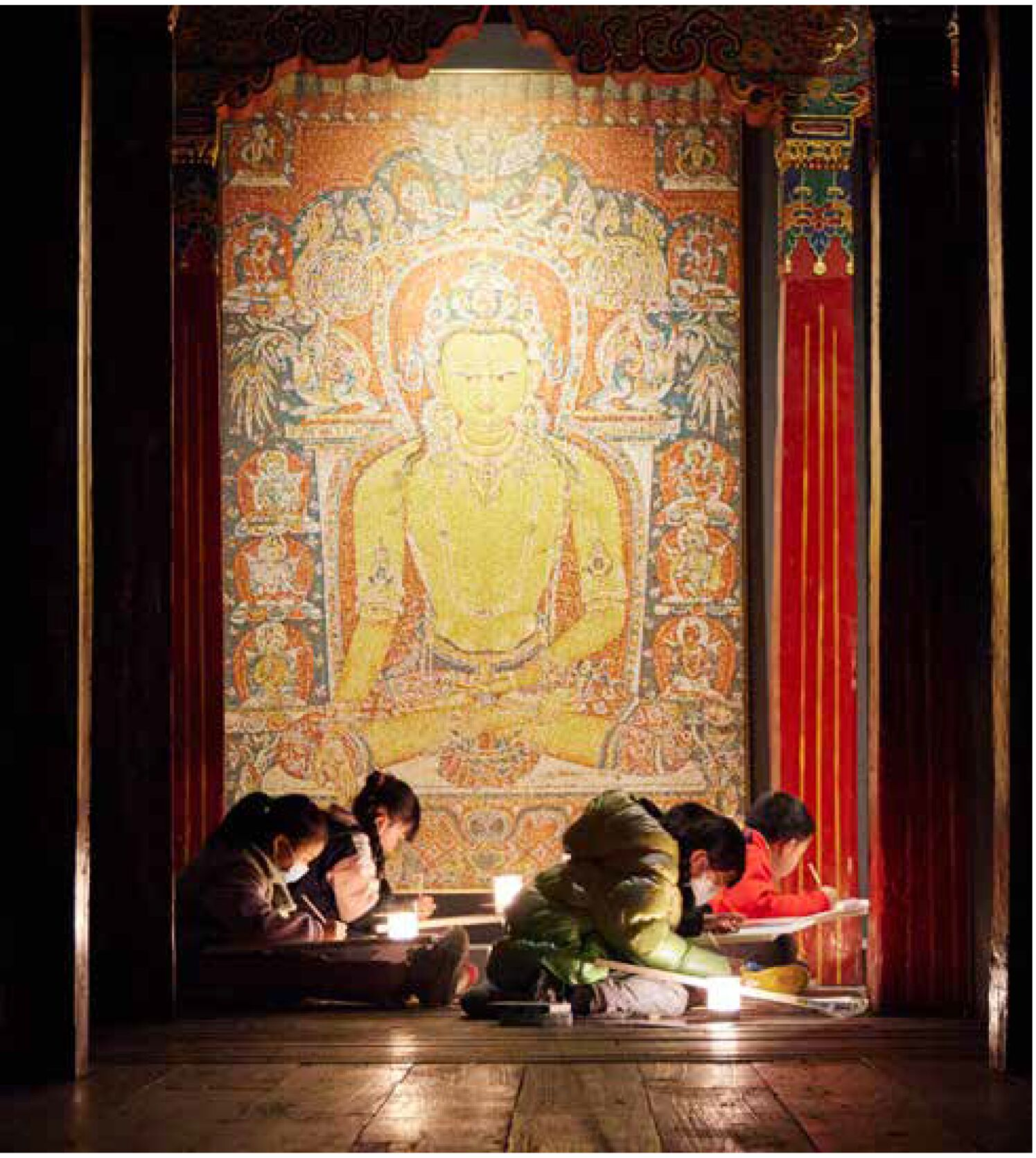
The space was constructed during a time of foreign influence in the region, when Britain and Russia were locked in



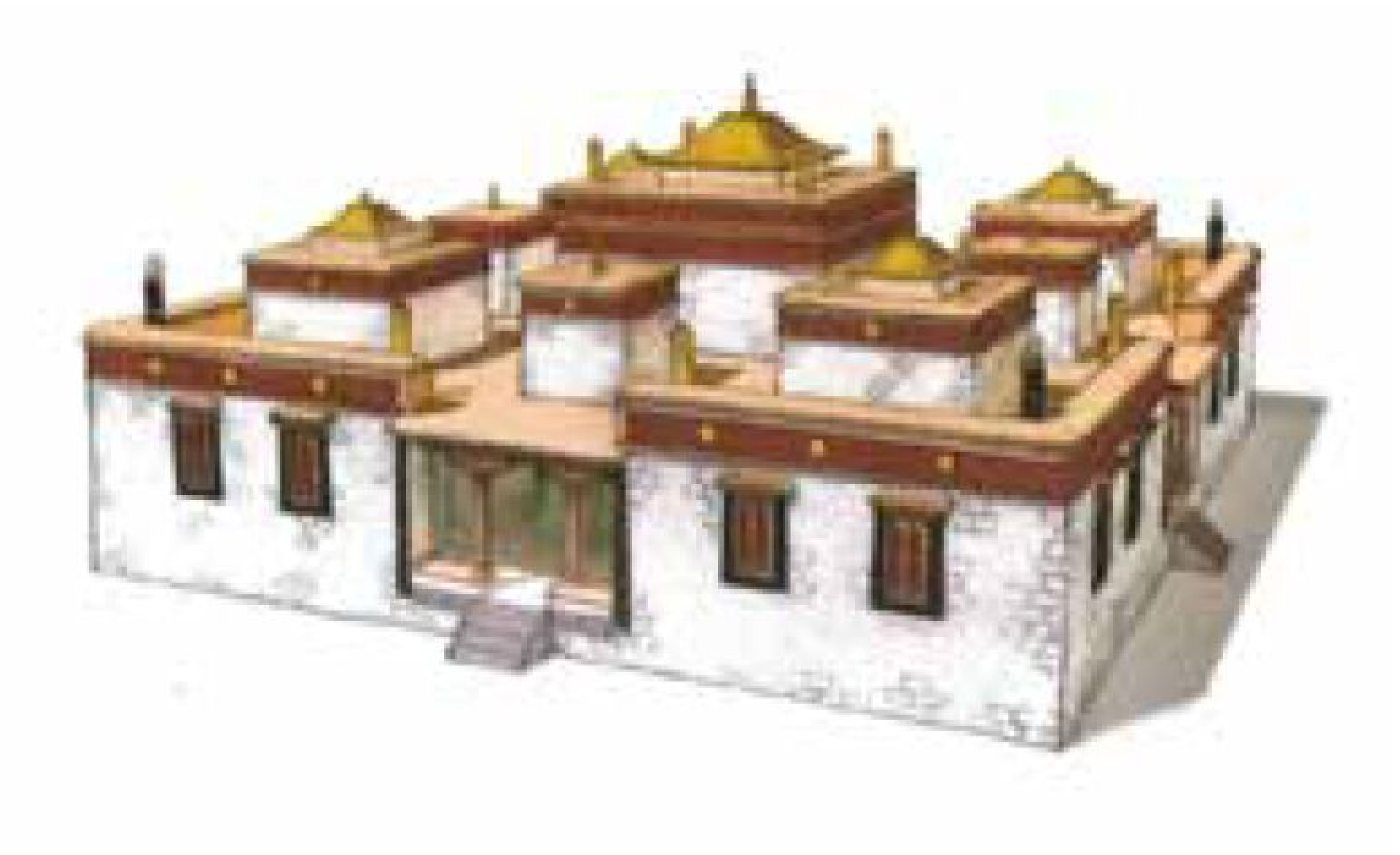
**An overhead view of the Potala Palace, Lhasa** (Photo by IC)

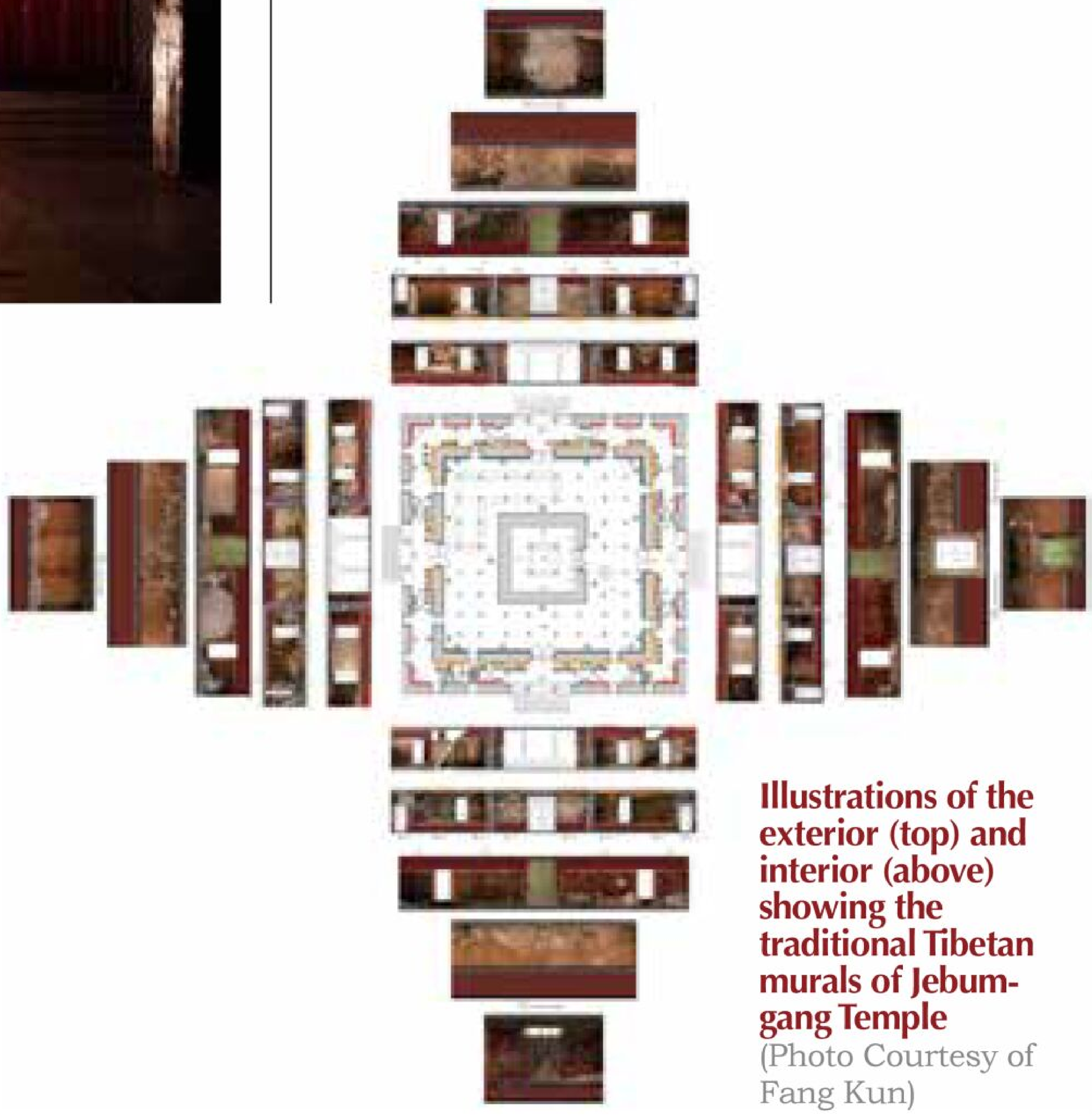
**Tibetan artist Gade's first solo show titled Gade Dream Yoga at Jebum-gang Art Centre** (Photo Courtesy of Fang Kun)

**Repurposed industrial equipment at Xizang Art Museum, which used to be a cement factory** (Photo by Zhang Jing)



**Primary school students attend a drawing class at the Jebum-gang Art Centre, Lhasa** (Photo Courtesy of Fang Kun)





**Illustrations of the exterior (top) and interior (above) showing the traditional Tibetan murals of Jebum-gang Temple** (Photo Courtesy of Fang Kun)

a strategic rivalry over control of Xizang.

"In response to this looming threat, the local government, then under the control of the Gelug school, collaborated with monks from the Nyingma school. They incorporated an entire set of special ritual sequences into the murals, aiming to construct a spiritual defence mechanism through religious means," said Fang Kun, who is also director of the China Association for Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture.

Yet these efforts could not prevent the British invasion of Lhasa in 1904. In an old photograph, British troops are seen swaggering past Jebum-gang, surrounded by helpless Tibetan monks and civilians.

In the aftermath, the building underwent numerous transformations, serving at various times as Xizang's first electrical substation, a grain bureau warehouse and residential housing. The once-pristine architectural features and exquisite murals endured long years of neglect and deterioration.

Since the late 20th century, scholars from both East and West have begun to recognise the academic value of the structure. Himalayan architectural preservationist Andre Alexander and his team paid particular attention to Jebum-gang Temple during their research on Lhasa's old city. In his book *The Temples of Lhasa*, he described it as "one of the most inspiring examples of (recent) historic Tibetan architecture" and "highly deserving of protection."

It was not until 2017 that Lhasa's municipal and Chengguan District governments took the lead in funding Jebum-gang's protection and restoration, inviting a team of professionals specialising in historical architecture conservation. However, fully revitalising the temple and realising its contemporary cultural value remained a formidable challenge.

In 2018, local authorities commissioned cultural enterprise Tihho to transform the space into an art centre. Through a series of upgrades, including waterproofing, electrical, museum-grade lighting and the creation of functional spaces, the team breathed new life into the building, making it suitable for hosting international exhibitions and cultural events.

"In promoting Tibetan culture abroad, we realised that many in the Western world still hold outdated stereotypes and Orientalist fantasies about Xizang," said Fang Kun, who has worked in Tibetan contemporary art promotion for over a decade. "Some people still imagine Tibetans living primitive lives or believe Xizang is some ethereal, untouched Eastern utopia. There are even those in the West who think Xizang should remain frozen in time and oppose its modernisation. But Tibetans not only have a rich traditional culture, they also have a thriving contemporary culture. Unfortunately, this side of Xizang is often overlooked."

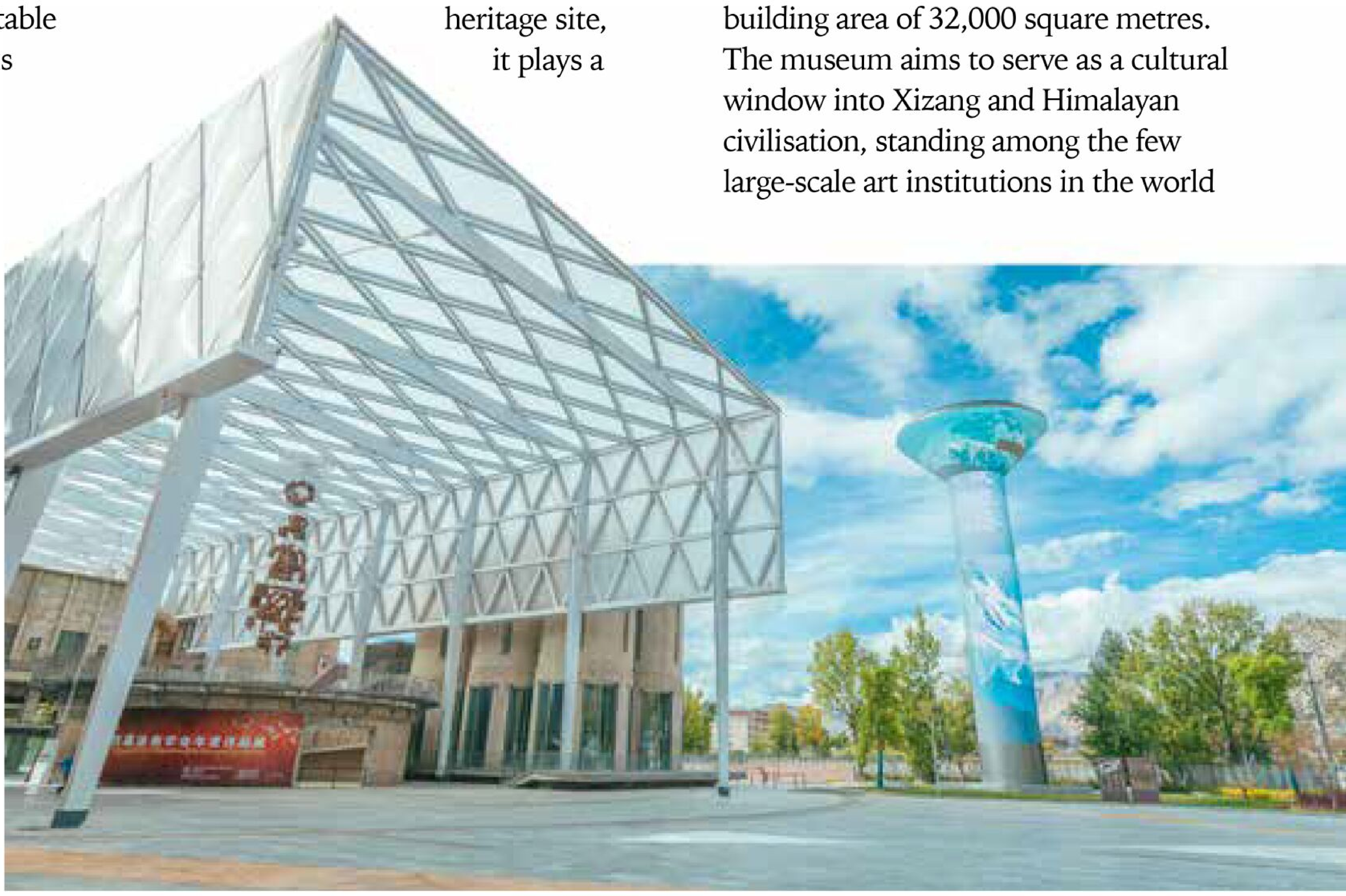
In July 2021, Jebum-gang Temple was reborn as the Jebum-gang Art Centre, opening to the public with free admission. Since then, it has hosted a series of contemporary exhibitions and cultural programmes such as *The Living Old City*, *Traditional Tibetan Tiger Rugs* and the *Infinite Cosmos* digital art show, blending Tibetan elements with modern artistic expression. The centre has become a venue for cultural education programmes for primary and secondary school students, as well as public performances of intangible cultural heritage.

## Concrete Approach

Temples are not the only structures seeing such transformations. A notable example is Xizang Art Museum, developed from the former site of the Lhasa Cement Factory. As the only provincial-level art museum in China created from an industrial heritage site, it plays a key role in preserving and repurposing Xizang's industrial legacy.

Founded in 1960, Lhasa Cement Factory was the earliest and largest cement production enterprise in Xizang. During the redesign, much of the original cement production line and factory buildings were preserved. Scattered structures and equipment across the site were surveyed by a design team from Tongji University in Shanghai. By creatively reconfiguring the relationship between old and new spaces, the team wove together a coherent spatial narrative that encourages shared experiences. The resulting design skillfully integrates the dispersed layout characteristic of industrial heritage, resulting in four core functional areas: the main exhibition hall, an interactive art experience zone, an artist-in-residence creation base and an art market.

Situated at an altitude of 3,700 metres, Xizang Art Museum occupies 47,000 square metres of land, with a building area of 32,000 square metres. The museum aims to serve as a cultural window into Xizang and Himalayan civilisation, standing among the few large-scale art institutions in the world



**The main entrance art corridor of Xizang Art Museum, Lhasa** (Photo by Zhang Jing) located at such a high altitude.

In the design of public architecture in Lhasa, expressing and preserving Tibetan cultural identity is a central challenge. However, Xizang Art Museum does not merely rely on symbolic replication of historical styles. Instead, it resonates with Lhasa's collective memory through thoughtful reconfiguration of volume, space, materials and scale.

Since its opening in 2023, Xizang Art Museum has successfully hosted numerous large-scale art exhibitions, educational programmes and academic exchanges. At the same time, it has become integrated into the daily lives of residents in Lhasa and surrounding communities as a public cultural space.

According to its director Lhakpa Tsering, the museum has amassed a number of rare artworks that reflect the evolution of modern and contemporary Tibetan art. "Since its opening, Xizang Art Museum has sparked widespread enthusiasm among local residents and tourists alike, quickly becoming a new cultural landmark and a must-visit destination in Lhasa," Lhakpa Tsering said.

Xizang Art Museum was awarded the Supreme Award for Structural Engineering Excellence at the 2024 Structural Awards, given by the UK-based Institution of Structural Engineers. Judges highlighted the project's seismic retrofitting in a challenging high-altitude environment.

The building fuses architectural artistry and traditional Tibetan culture, offering a fresh and inspiring model for the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage. Judges noted that the project effectively repurposes the cement factory's storage rooms, kilns and slurry tanks, while preserving much of the original structure to minimise new material use.

The building fuses architectural artistry and traditional Tibetan culture, offering a fresh and inspiring model for the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage

"We've shown that an old factory can be transformed into a spiritual vessel that carries both faith and contemporary art," said Li Li, chief designer of Xizang Art Museum and professor at Tongji University's College of Architecture and

**A sculpture depicts Songtsen Gampo (right) and Princess Wencheng (left) at Xizang Art Museum, Lhasa** (Photo by Zhang Jing)

Urban Planning. "It offers a new model for revitalising industrial heritage."

## Palace on the Hill

Even world-renowned landmarks such as the Potala Palace are being revitalised.

Perched atop Red Hill in the heart of the Lhasa River Valley at an altitude of 3,750 metres, the Potala Palace, once a centre of Tibetan political and religious power, is a cultural and artistic treasure.

Since the peaceful liberation of Xizang in 1951, the Chinese government has placed great importance on preserving the Potala Palace. In 1961, it was designated as a National Key Cultural Relic Protection Unit, and in 1994, it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

From 1989 to 1995, China invested over 200 million yuan (US$28m) to renovate the palace and expanding its square. At the end of 2018, a 300 million yuan (US$42m) national project was launched to protect and utilise cultural relics, including ancient books and documents housed within the palace.

As a traditional structure built of wood, earth and stone, the Potala Palace has a low resistance to fire and houses many flammable cultural relics such as thangkas and Buddhist scriptures. Today, an intelligent fire alarm system operates within the palace. "This system uses advanced sensors and algorithms to monitor fire conditions in real time and automatically trigger alarms at the earliest sign of danger," said Thubten Tsering, director of the palace's monitoring centre.

The palace has also introduced a smart electricity and energy consumption system, as well as seismic and lightning sensors. According to Thubten Tsering, new methods and tech will be explored to protect the site.

In 2025, Xizang will launch a preventive conservation project targeting the Potala Palace's cultural relics and architecture. As pest infestations are common in ancient buildings, domestic and international experts have been invited to conduct evaluations and develop targetted prevention measures.

According to Penpa Chungtak, head of the Cultural Relics Protection Centre at the Potala Palace Management Office, "From 2025 to 2028, the Chinese government will continue promoting the protection and utilisation of ancient texts housed in the Potala Palace, including a dedicated conservation project for palm-leaf manuscripts and other rare documents. As planned, restoration work will be completed on 465 volumes

**Top: The Potala Palace in Lhasa** (Photo by IC)

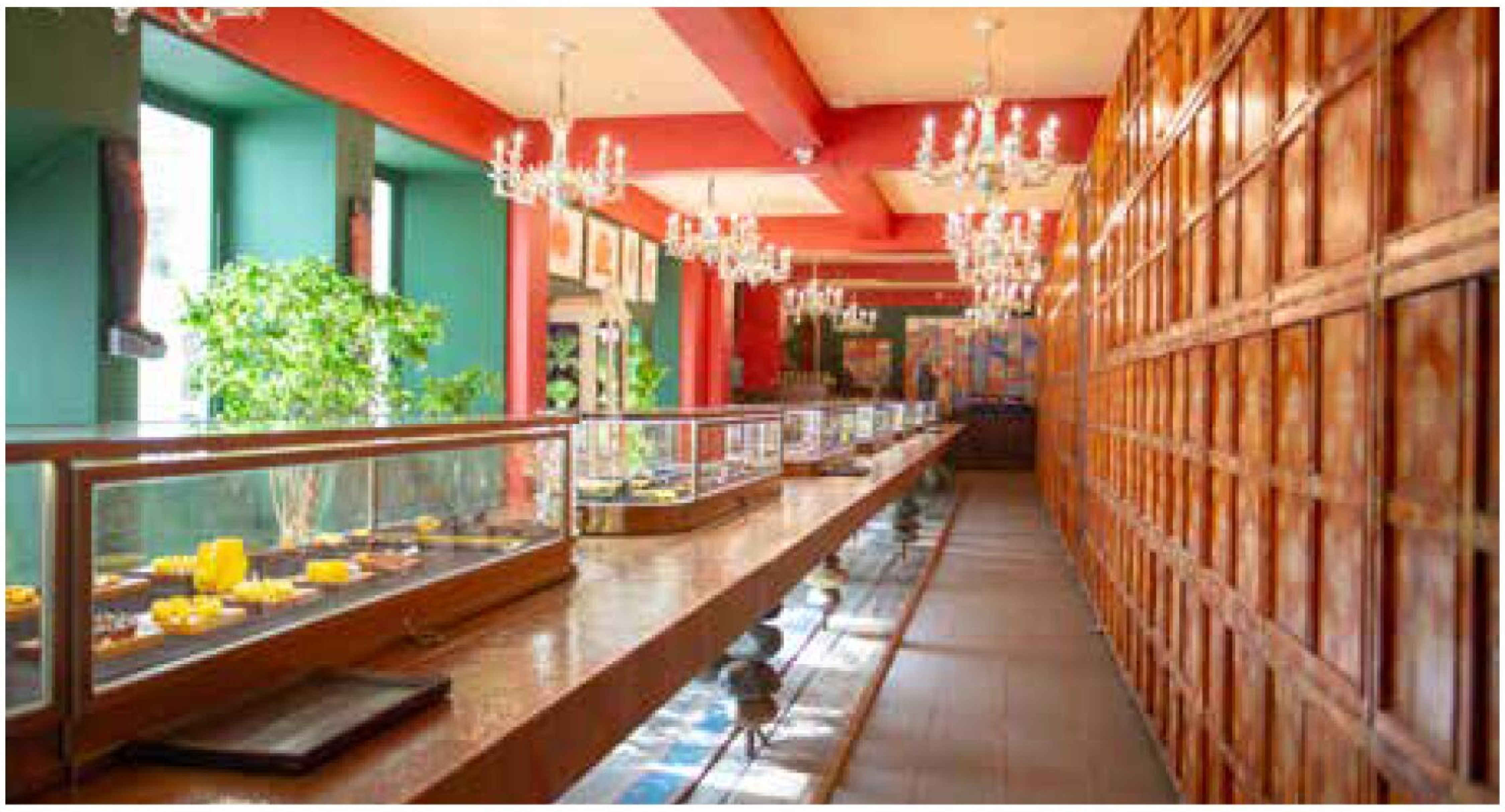
**Above: Penpa Chungtak (left), head of the Cultural Relics Protection Centre at the Potala Palace Management Office, examines a thangka collection at the Potala Palace in Lhasa, May 26, 2025** (Photo by CNS) of palm-leaf manuscripts and 39,752 volumes of other ancient texts."

Meanwhile, the "Digital Smart Potala" Cultural Tourism Integration Demonstration Zone is steadily advancing. Inspired by internationally recognised initiatives such as Digital Dunhuang, an archiving of the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu Province, the project aims to build a digital hub centered on the Potala Palace Digital Museum, leveraging its UNESCO status. It will also include off-site storage facilities to protect relics.

To address long-standing issues of limited public access and ticket scarcity, experts are reevaluating visitor capacity. According to Kunga Tashi, deputy director of the Potala Palace Management Office, structural monitoring equipment has been installed in key areas, including major wooden structures and wall systems. Since 2008, these devices have operated around the clock to track structural changes.

This attention to detail provides early warnings and helps guide visitor management. "If excessive visitor numbers begin to impact the building, the system will detect it," Kunga Tashi said. "In such cases, we take intervention measures such as temporarily closing affected areas, reinforcing structures and inspecting deformations. If serious issues are detected, we may close off an entire hall and adjust visitor routes accordingly."

The Potala Palace was constructed using traditional materials such as *aga* soil (a mix of clay and crushed rocks used to coat ceilings and floors) and *bama* grass (a thick straw used to construct lighter walls on higher floors). Since the 1990s, efforts have been made to stockpile these materials. "It can be said with pride that the Potala Palace may be the only institution in the region with such a comprehensive reserve of these construction materials," Kunga Tashi said. "As environmental and forestry regulations become stricter, obtaining these materials is becoming increasingly difficult. We're also researching alternative materials."



**Top: Cultural products are on display at the Weland Museum of Contemporary Art**
(Photo Courtesy of Xu Yinglong)

**Above: A corridor at the Weland Museum of Contemporary Art**
(Photo Courtesy of Xu Yinglong)

## Light and Shadow

According to white paper Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era (2025) published by China's State Council Information Office, Xizang had 4,468 registered cultural heritage sites as of December 2024, with 2.84 billion yuan (US$395m) invested in 377 conservation projects from 2016 to 2024.

Beyond these efforts, new architectural spaces have emerged that are continuing Xizang's artistic and cultural legacy.

After more than a decade of planning, the Weland Museum of Contemporary Art, Xizang's first private institution of its kind, opened to the public in 2023. Located on Xianzu Island by the Lhasa River, the centre includes exhibition halls, a stage, a café and a study.

Xu Yinglong, the museum's director and architect, said he is more interested in "how Tibetan space is perceived" than in "how Tibetan architecture is reproduced."

"When it comes to Xizang, people are often accustomed to gazing upon it through fixed impressions. What I hope to do with Weland is to break this one-directional mode of viewing and help every visitor realise that Xizang is not an object to be observed, it's a living cultural field with its own subjectivity, agency and capacity to respond," he said.

Through choice of materials, lighting and movement paths, Xu said his design attempts to guide visitors to actively "read" the cultural clues embedded within it. For example, among the museum's 77 windows, not a single one shares the same shape. As light shifts throughout the day, the quality and angle of the incoming light change.

"Lhasa is known as the City of Sunshine, so our primary consideration was how to create the interaction between architecture and sunlight," Xu said.

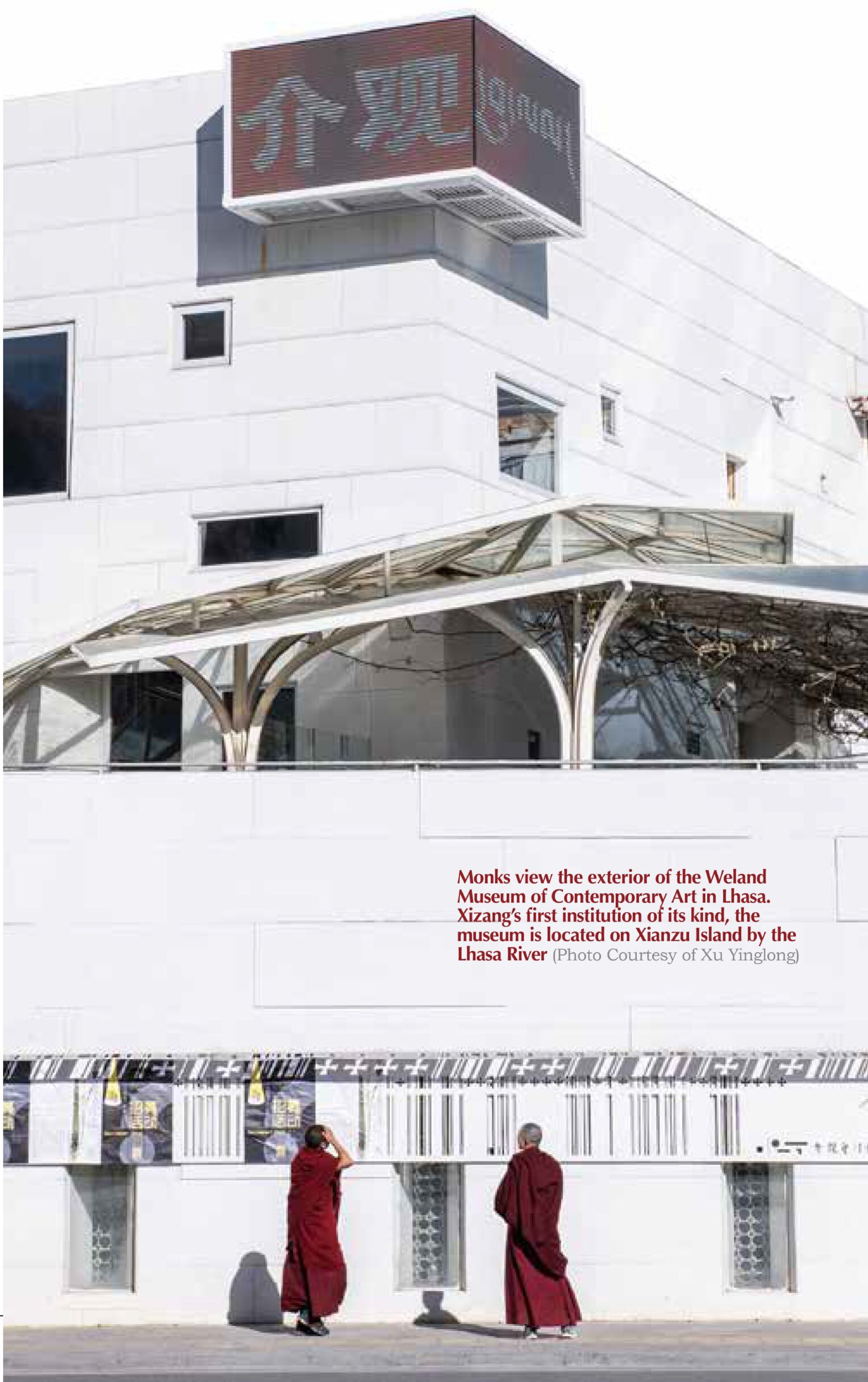
Details of folk painting, architectural art, local culture and regional elements are integral to the design. "Atop the four corridor columns, we used Tibetan yak bells traditionally hung around the necks of yaks. We incorporated this element into the stage lighting design of our central atrium, as a tribute to the region's agrarian culture," Xu said.

The Weland Museum's open courtyard design won the Italy-based A' Design Award in 2020 for best spatial design, while also acknowledging its use of local building materials, natural topography and solar energy to minimise environmental impact.

Since opening in October 2019, the centre has received around 20,000 visitors annually, including 1,200 international tourists. Starting in late 2024, it began inviting young artists to create work in Lhasa each year, with plans to host 800 artists over the next decade, exploring the fusion of traditional Lhasa architecture with contemporary art. This initiative encourages participants to integrate their unique perspectives and artistic styles with the cultural heritage and natural landscapes of Lhasa.

Xu said the institution provides a platform for young local artists to showcase their work, while presenting the creative spirit of a vibrant new generation in Xizang. "My ideal is to build Weland into China's Centre Pompidou," he told *ChinaReport*, referring to the home of France's National Museum of Modern Art.

"In fact, we have a vision. Through this institution, through this space, and through this platform, we want the people of Xizang, especially the younger generation, to see another side of the world. At the same time, we hope the world can see another side of Xizang," Xu said.★



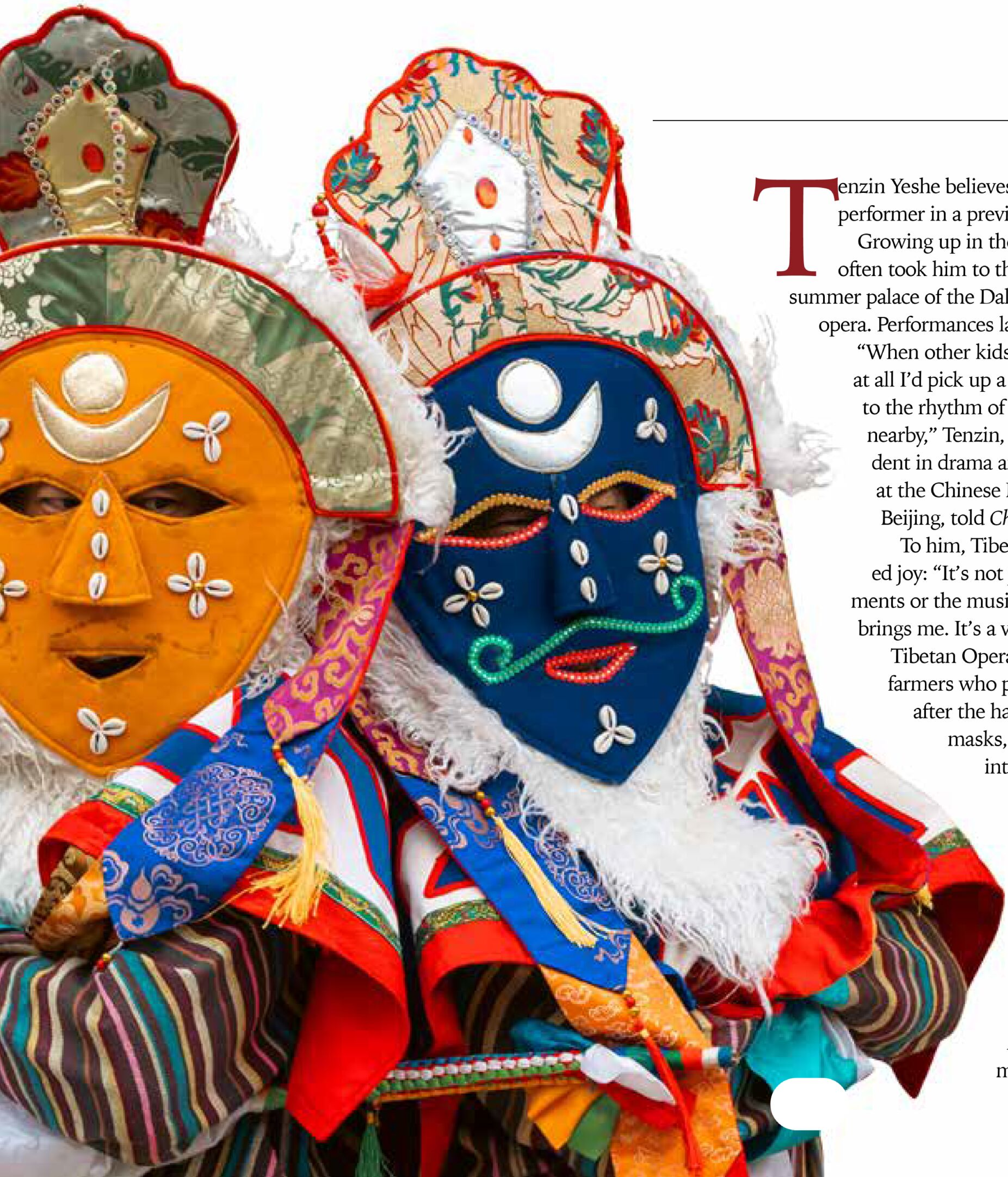
**Monks view the exterior of the Weland Museum of Contemporary Art in Lhasa. Xizang's first institution of its kind, the museum is located on Xianzu Island by the Lhasa River** (Photo Courtesy of Xu Yinglong)

Xizang 60th Anniversary

# THE MASKED SINGERS

## Once dwindling, the ancient art of Tibetan Opera is now reaching new stages of development thanks to greater government and audience support

By Wang Yan



Tenzin Yeshe believes he was a Tibetan Opera performer in a previous life.

Growing up in the 1990s, his grandparents often took him to the Norbulingka, the former summer palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, to watch opera. Performances lasted all day.

"When other kids were playing, for no reason at all I'd pick up a small twig and start dancing to the rhythm of the Tibetan Opera drums nearby," Tenzin, now 32 and a doctoral student in drama and traditional opera studies at the Chinese National Academy of Arts in Beijing, told *ChinaReport*.

To him, Tibetan Opera evokes a deep-rooted joy: "It's not just the arias, the body movements or the music. It's the overall joyfulness it brings me. It's a very strange sensation."

Tibetan Opera performers were mainly farmers who performed in their spare time after the harvest. Performers often wear masks, and the operas are divided into schools based on the mask colour: blue, white, yellow and black. Each colour symbolises different roles, and are popular in different regions.

The blue-mask school is the most popular style. Originating in what is today's western Xizang Autonomous Region, blue masks often represent heroic figures in epic tales.

The Shol Tibetan Opera Troupe, a blue-mask troupe founded in 1946, is among the most influential. Tenzin Yeshe joined in 2016 and began formal training under Penpa Tsering, its deputy director. Over the past decade, he has mastered roles from all eight works of the classical repertoire, including human and animal characters. “I’m even skilled at performing female roles,” he said.

From its founding to the 1960s, the troupe maintained a core cast of 16. Disbanded in the 1970s, it was later restructured in 1984 into the Shol Tibetan Opera Cooperative, becoming a professional troupe.

Today, it has 56 professional performers ranging in age from 18 to 71, with 32 men and 24 women. In 2004, the Shol Tibetan Opera Performing Arts Company, incorporated on the basis of the Shol Tibetan Opera Troupe, became the first Tibetan Opera troupe in Xizang to market itself as a company.

These changes embody a larger revival in Tibetan Opera, fuelled by government support, public patronage and international attention.

**Top: A crowd watches a Tibetan Opera performance in Lhasa, circa 1910. A traditional folk art, Tibetan Opera performances are held during the Shoton Festival, Tibetan New Year and during specific religious festivals** (Photo by VCG)

**Above: A crowd watches a Tibetan Opera performance outside Drepung Monastery during the Shoton Festival, Lhasa, August 14, 2015** (Photo by VCG)

## Rallying the Troupes

Tibetan Opera was listed as China’s national intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and included on UNESCO’s list of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

The blue-mask school, known in Tibetan as *Ache Lhamo* (“fairy sisters”), is a form of secular theatre dating back more than 600 years. Its origins can be traced back more than 1,000 years to folk beliefs and ritual activities, possibly as early as the region’s pre-Buddhist era around the 8th century. It incorporates elements of history, folklore, legend and Buddhist teachings.

“Tibetan Opera plays a significant role in the lives of rural communities,” said Sangye Dondrup, a researcher and art commentator from the National Art Institute of Xizang in Lhasa.

Around 1430, the monk and engineer Thangtong Gyalpo built iron suspension bridges across major rivers on the plateau, including the Yarlung Zangbo River (the highest altitude river in the world), to improve transportation.

To raise funds, he recruited seven young women from among his builders to perform traditional Tibetan songs and dances. “That’s how the school got the name *Ache Lhamo*, or ‘fairy sisters,’” Sangye Dondrup told *ChinaReport*.

During the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1618-1682), Tibetan Opera became increasingly secular and eventually emerged as an independent dramatic form. “By the 18th century, Buddhist stories translated into Tibetan began to merge with local folk tales, giving rise to full repertoires,” he said.

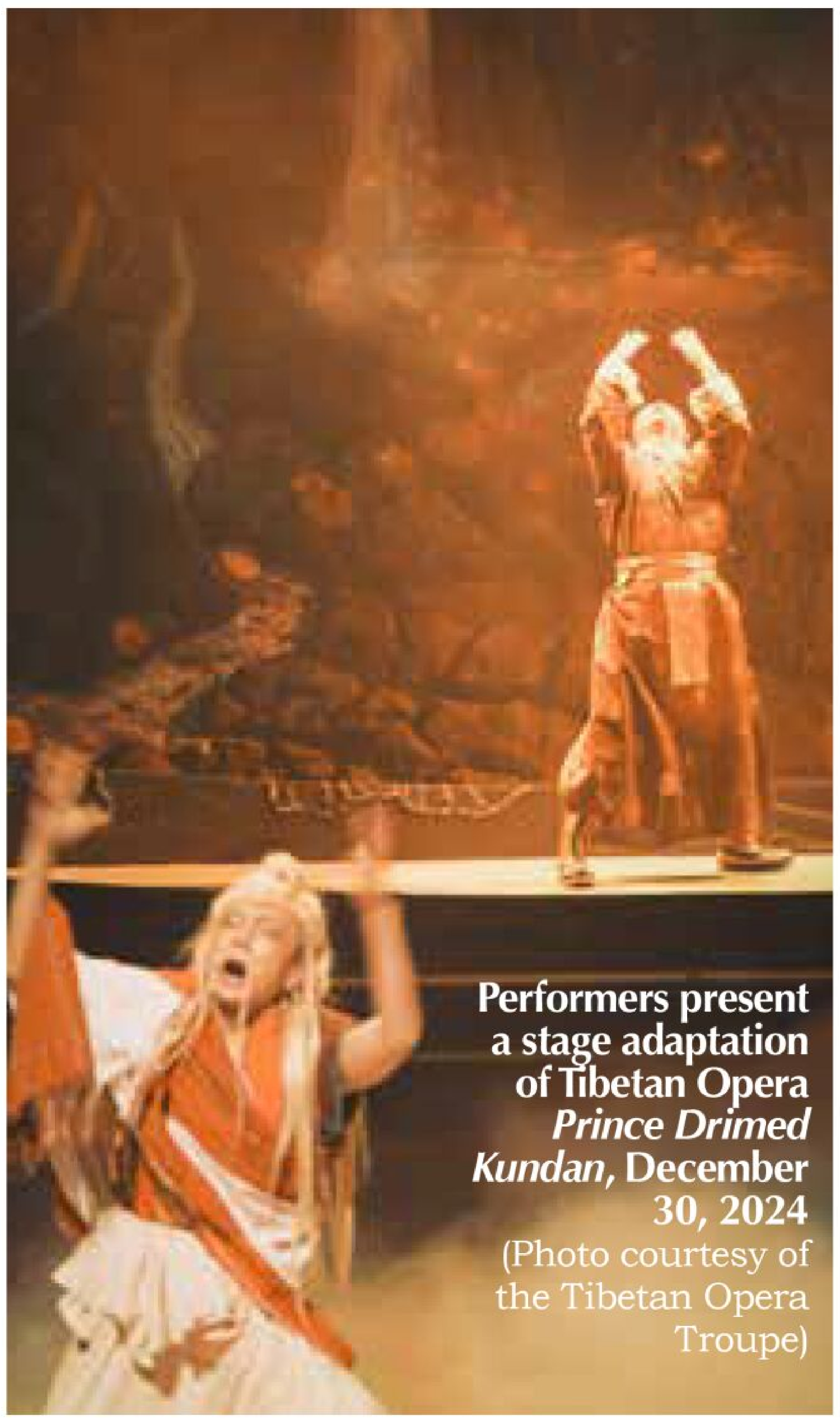
A typical Tibetan Opera performance consists of three parts: a prologue featuring clowns or spirits to bless the performance, the main narrative and an epilogue offering prayers and blessings. The prologue features a ceremonial dance and chant by seven blue-masked hunters, two berobed *gyalu* (prefects) and seven *dakinis* (celestial fairies). These rituals, according to Sangye Dondrup, purify the performance space and invite celestial beings. Before the main story begins, performers salute their patron saint, the engineer-monk Thangtong Gyalpo.

The eight traditional repertoires are based on biographies of heroes and heroines drawn from magic tales, ancient legends, historical records and Buddhist teachings. These stories focus on loyalty, karma, enlightenment and moral values, often telling of young heroes who overcome hardships to become kings or attain spiritual achievements.

Performers are judged on their rhythmic movements and the quality of their arias, which vary by gender, emotion, plot and character. Comedic interludes and improvisations add to the atmosphere. "It's an art form rich in artistic elements," Tenzin Yeshe said. "There are over 20 types of arias and more than 200 distinct body movements. I'm trying to decode the meaning behind each of them, their expressive functions and aesthetic principles."

Traditionally, Tibetan Opera is performed in open circular spaces that accommodate hundreds or even thousands of spectators. They attract entire communities, who stay for seven or eight hours, enjoying meals and picnics as part of the event. Although nearly everyone in the audience knows the stories and songs, it remains a joyful experience, particularly for older viewers.

"Tibetan Opera has always been for the people, especially farmers, as a way to spread Buddhist teachings in an accessible form," Sangye Dondrup said. "Now, its inheritance is taking two directions. One is traditional open-air performances by part-time troupes across Tibetan areas. The other is professional stage productions in modern theatres organised by institutions such as the Tibetan Opera Troupe run by the local government."



Performers present a stage adaptation of Tibetan Opera *Prince Drimed Kundan*, December 30, 2024 (Photo courtesy of the Tibetan Opera Troupe)

> "Tibetan Opera is not only favoured by the elderly but is also attracting younger audiences, including primary school students. Many are learning to perform in their spare time"

To meet the demands of modern audiences, Tibetan Opera is most often performed in theatres with improved acoustics. Shows typically last about two hours and are put on in both city centres and rural communities.

## Touring Casts

According to official statistics, the Xizang government has provided aid to 154 Tibetan Opera performance troupes across the region since 2005 as part of an intangible cultural heritage protection initiative. The Tibetan Opera Troupe is the only regional-level professional troupe in Xizang. Most other troupes are amateur, made up of part-time performers. Developed from the once-popular Jormolung Opera Troupe in Lhasa, the regional troupe was reorganised into a State-owned enterprise following the establishment of the Xizang Autonomous Region in 1965.

According to Palden Wangqug, head of the troupe, its membership has grown from around 40 in the 1960s to more than 120 today. As an official professional troupe, it includes not only performers but also staff dedicated to directing, stage design, operations and research. Palden said that in the 60 years since the founding of Xizang Autonomous Region, the favourable environment for Tibetan Opera has led to unprecedented achievements.

"When I joined the troupe in the mid-2000s, there were only a few people attending our theatre performances. Open-air shows were more popular, but the audiences were mostly elderly," said Sonam Chodron, a performer and director at the Tibetan Opera Troupe.

"Now, the situation has completely changed. Tibetan Opera is not only favoured by the elderly but is also attracting younger audiences, including primary school students. Many are learning to perform in their spare time," she said.

Tenzin Mengnam, a 16-year-old high school student in Lhasa, began learning Tibetan Opera at 6. Every weekend, Tenzin Mengnam attends free opera classes at the People's Art Hall in Lhasa, an initiative started by retired artist Drongphurjung in 2015. "I was drawn to the actors' jumps, spins, masks and arias. The fast-paced, syncopated chants were completely new to me," he said. In 2015, only five or six children studied under Drongphurjung. Today, more than 100 participate.

In 2023, Tenzin Mengnam played the lead in the classic *Donyo Dondrup*, an opera about two half-brother princes who are reunited after multiple life-or-death challenges. All 33 actors in the production were between the ages of 10 and 16. Tenzin Mengnam has now performed 17 times at indoor venues and public squares in cities such as Lhasa, Xigaze and Lhoka.

Through Xizang government subsidies, small village troupes can receive 50,000 yuan (US$7,000) annually. Larger county troupes, like the Shol Tibetan Opera Troupe and the Niangre Folk Art Troupe in Lhasa's Chengguan District, receive even more through performance grants.

Tenzin Phuntsok, manager of the Niangre Folk Art Troupe, told *ChinaReport* that the troupe has grown from 30 members in 1979 to 53 today. Xizang has introduced a performance-based funding model that ties subsidies to the number of public shows. "If we do 60 free performances a year, we can receive 1.5 million yuan (US$209,000) in subsidies," he said. The troupe also performs ticketed shows in Xizang and other regions of China, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Jiangsu Province.

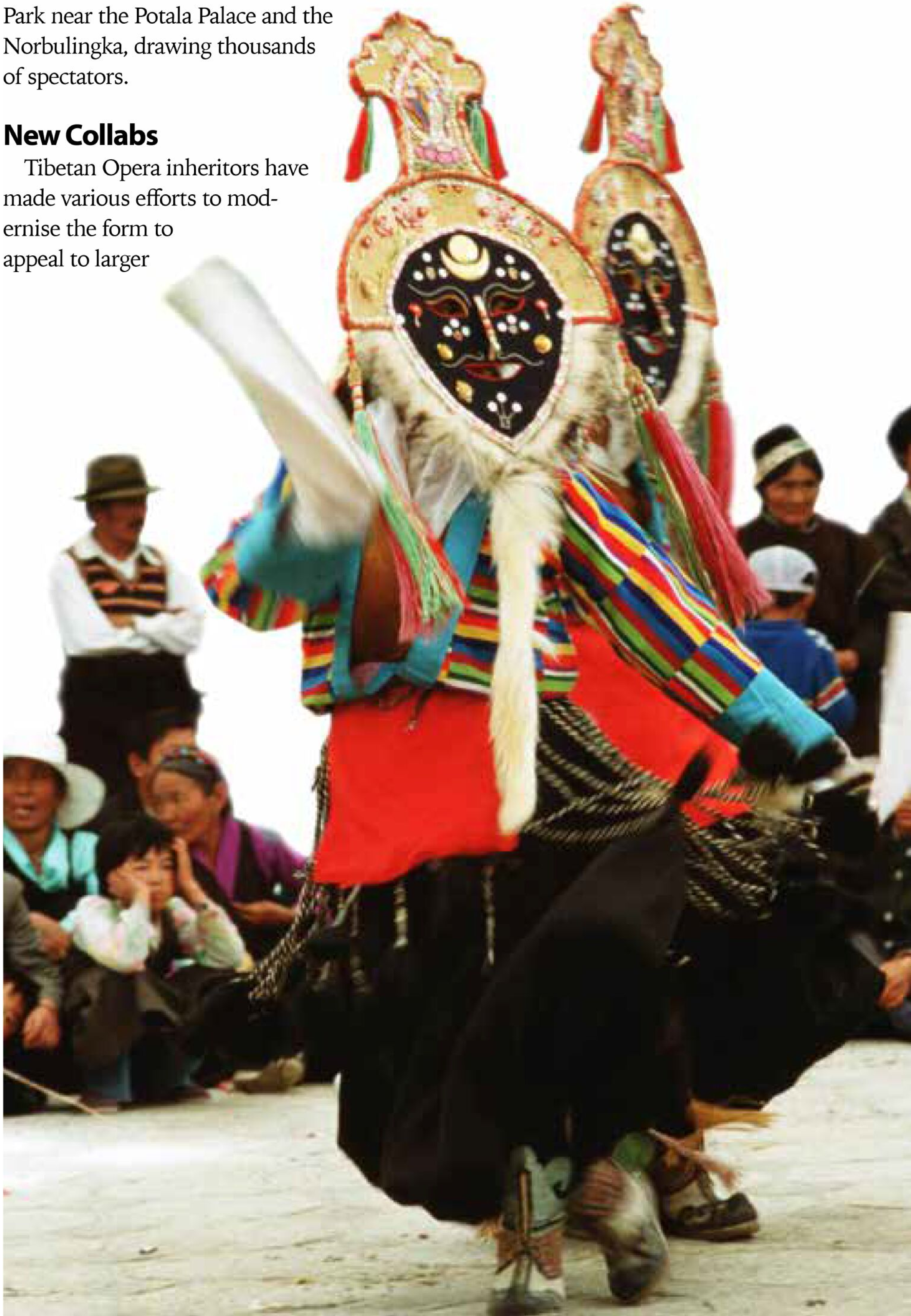
Both Tenzin Yeshe and Tenzin Phuntsok noted that a combination of subsidies and commercial revenue provides a stable livelihood for their performers.

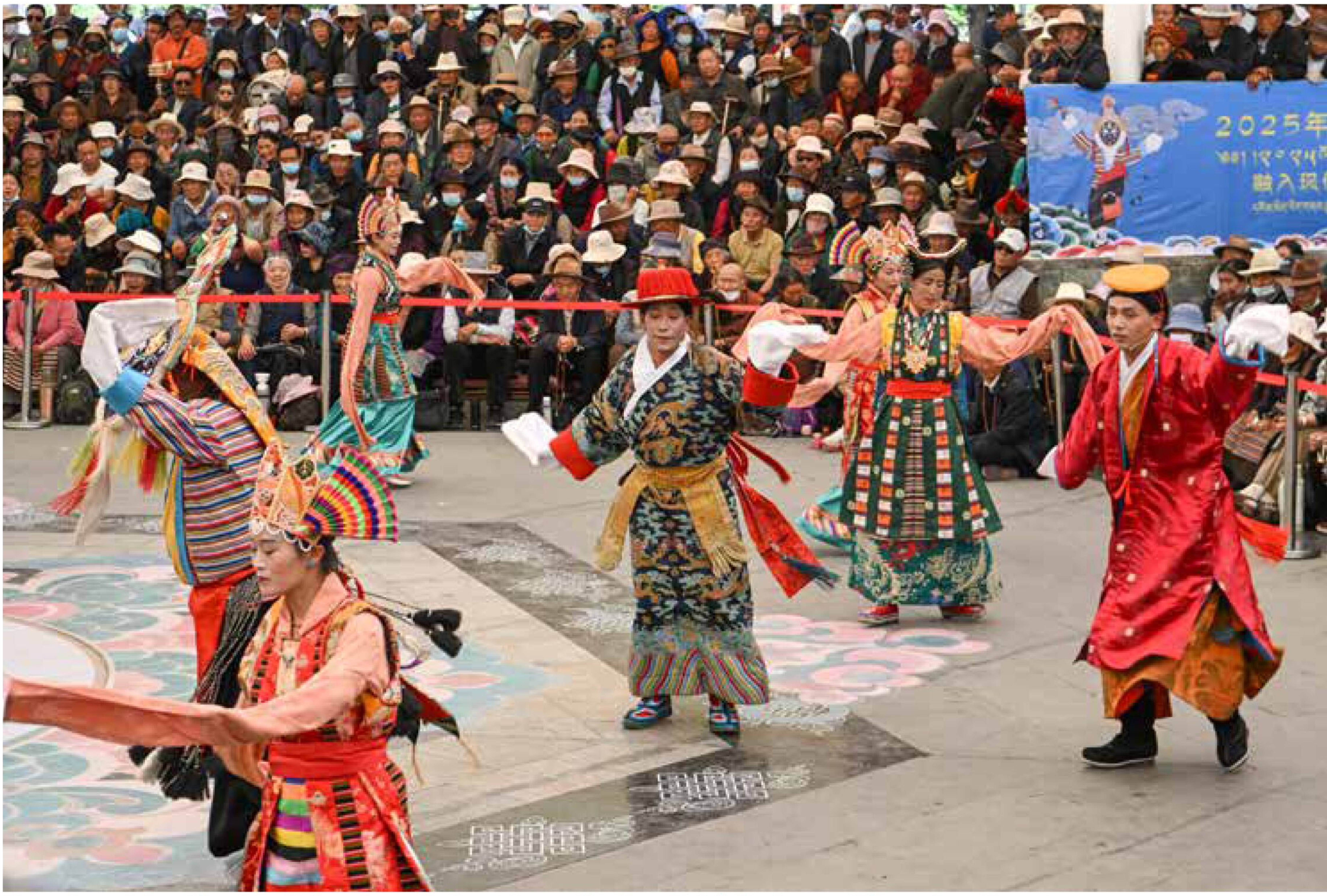
In recent years, Tibetan Opera has become a highlight at festivals such as Tibetan New Year, the seven-day Shoton Festival (also known as the Yoghurt Festival), the harvest festival of Ongkor, horse races and religious events. Since 2018, the Lhasa Municipal Bureau of Culture has hosted the Tibetan Opera Season each summer from May to July. Fully funded by the government, the event brings together troupes from across the region to perform in locations such as Dzongyab Lukhang Park near the Potala Palace and the Norbulingka, drawing thousands of spectators.

## New Collabs

Tibetan Opera inheritors have made various efforts to modernise the form to appeal to larger audiences and adapt the ancient folk art for younger generations.

Since 2013, the regional Tibetan Opera Troupe has been engaged in modernising, digitising and documenting the eight classical Tibetan Operas. Adaptations include shifting performances





**Tibetan Opera *Prince Drimed Kundan* is performed in Lhasa's Dzongyab Lukhang Park during the annual Tibetan Opera Season, June 13, 2025**
(Photo by CNS)

to indoor theatres equipped with 3D projections, LED screens and virtual reality environments.

According to Palden Wangqug, these adaptations preserve the original storylines and themes while enhancing accessibility for contemporary audiences.

Since 2017, the troupe has expanded its repertoire to include original operas on modern themes, such as environmental conservation, rural revitalisation and cultural preservation. One opera portrays a Tibetan village's decades-long battle against desertification, while another tells the story of a college graduate returning to his hometown to promote local development.

In late 2024, a new adaptation of *Prince Drimed Kundan*, one of the eight classical operas, was staged at the Tibetan Opera Art Centre Theatre in Lhasa. The story follows a virtuous prince who overcomes adversity and reaches enlightenment, embodying themes of compassion and courage. Performed by members of both the regional and Shol Tibetan Opera troupes, the show marked a historic collaboration between an official and a folk troupe. For three consecutive days, the theatre's 1,000 seats were fully occupied.

The production was directed by Sonam Chodron, a graduate of the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. She noted that the two-month rehearsal fostered a highly inclusive environment where both troupes learned from one another. "Folk troupes like Shol have an earthy, authentic performance style that is deeply rooted in the public," Sonam said. "This is something our troupe run by the local government can learn from."

Art commentator Sangye Dondrup agreed, calling the collaboration a positive beginning. He observed that performers from the Shol troupe demonstrated natural ease and fluidity in their performances.

To help enhance the production, Sonam introduced techniques such as the Stanislavski acting system, which focuses on emotional realism, and the Suzuki vocal training method for actors. The resulting performance was widely praised by audiences and experts alike. "It was a real surprise for everyone," she said.

"Traditionally, we relied entirely on oral transmission from master to student. That remains the case for most folk troupes today. But in the modern era, theoretical knowledge and practical stagecraft are essential to meet evolving audience expectations," Sonam said. "Folk and official troupes complement each other. One is not more important than the other."

## 'Ancient Avant-garde'

"Tibetan Opera is a relaxed art form. Its open-air setting reflects its deep ties to the land," Tenzin Yeshe said. While watching the show, audiences interact with clowns and sometimes even participate in the performance.

In contrast, indoor performances inevitably lack these spontaneous interactions. Professionals recognise the challenge of balancing modern appeal with traditional authenticity.

"Especially when tackling realistic or cross-cultural themes, traditional forms face certain limitations. That's the reality. The question is how to inject new vitality without losing our roots," Sonam said. "Art must evolve. Without innovation, it risks extinction. What we now call 'traditional' Tibetan Opera is the result of generations of creative adaptation." She added that she is currently working on a Tibetan Opera adaptation of Shakespeare.

"No matter what kind of new creation I pursue, I always adhere to one principle: the essence of Tibetan Opera must remain intact," she said. This includes its three-part structure of prelude, main narrative and epilogue, as well as its vocal styles, recitations, body movements and percussion rhythms. "These are the foundation of the art. They must be preserved in any innovation."

Tenzin Yeshe shares this view. In 2022, he appeared on Guangdong TV reality show *Guoyue Dadian* for classic Chinese folk music, performing a scene that went viral online. Wearing a yellow Tibetan Opera mask of an old person, symbolising the earth, he recited in Tibetan: "Oh eagle of the high mountains... elk of the grassy slopes... fish of the lake, I never thought I would meet you."

The piece's themes of environmental protection and humanity's connection to nature resonated with the show's panel, especially ethnic Mongolian singer Daichin Tana from the band HAYA, who said: "The most ancient art is often the most avant-garde."

"Innovation and tradition are not contradictory, but mutually enriching," Sonam said. "If we fail to maintain this balance, the art form's future will be uncertain."★

**Top: Primary school Tibetan Opera performers talk during a performance in Chengguan District, Lhasa, December 6, 2019** (Photo by VCG)

**Above: Overseas tourists watch a Tibetan Opera performance in Lhasa, August 12, 2018** (Photo by CNS)

### Xizang 60th Anniversary

# WEAVING A NEW STORY

## Modern technology and designs, along with social media, are injecting new energy into traditional carpet weaving to sustain and promote the cultural legacy

By Xu Ming

Nyima Tashi, a 55-year-old craftsman who works at Tibetan carpet producer Khawachen in Lhasa, was busy weaving a rug when several visitors walked into the workshop on a late May afternoon. He threaded the yarn strand by strand through the weaving rods, tied knots, and then struck it with a hammer to tighten the weave. He did not notice the visitors at all until they gathered around him. Fans of the enterprise who had discovered it on lifestyle app RedNote, they watched as he worked, letting out oohs of admiration.

A master in handwoven Tibetan tapestry, Nyima Tashi comes from Xigaze, the second-largest city in China's Xizang Autonomous Region. He learned carpet weaving at 14 and joined Khawachen right from the start in 1994. "Weaving carpets requires extreme patience. Even the smallest piece takes several days. But finishing a piece gives me a strong sense of achievement," said the weaver who feels proud of carrying on the traditional techniques, which is listed as China's national intangible cultural heritage. Now he passes on his knowledge to the next generation.

Nyima Tashi said he is used to visitors coming from the rest of China and the world who know the company from social media, fascinated by its modern Tibetan rug designs and the intricate process of handcrafting. The factory, set in a Tibetan-style courtyard, still only sells handmade high-quality products.

"We get visitor bookings almost every day," said Zheng Yi (Phuntsok Tashi), general manager of Khawachen. Some place orders on the spot. It has

**Nyima Tashi weaves a rug at Khawachen, Lhasa, Xizang Autonomous Region, May 26, 2025**
(Photo by Xu Ming)

injected new vitality into the enterprise, where the workers have a passion for retaining traditional rug weaving techniques.

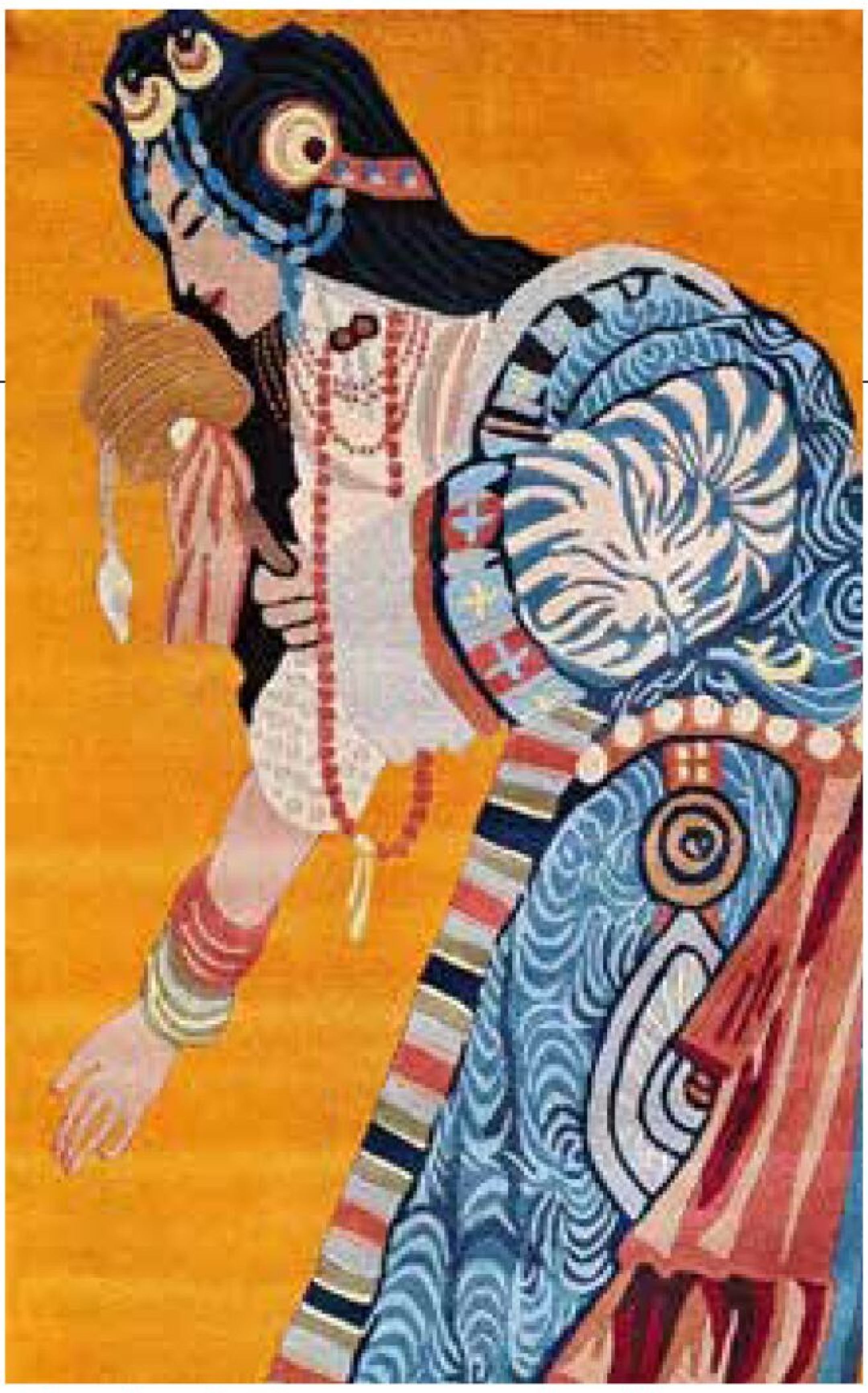
## Piles of History

The craft of weaving Tibetan rugs is thought to date back to around the 7th or 8th century. The thick-pile rugs are woven mainly from sheep wool and have many uses. In the household, the warm and moisture-resistant rugs are utilitarian, used for wall hangings, saddles, sleeping and particularly sitting on, a necessity for nomads living in traditional tents on the high plateau.

In monasteries, rugs cover low wooden platforms for monks to sit on. While rugs may be plain with one colour only, high-quality rugs are intricately patterned, with a colour palate of bright red, yellow, green and blue. Wealthier families could afford elaborate rugs with auspicious designs such as phoenixes, flowers, dragons, Buddhist swastikas or geometric patterns.

While records are sparse before the 20th century, places like Gyangze County and Lhasa were centres of production for a long time, and as more modern techniques were introduced to the Himalayan region following the peaceful liberation of Xizang in 1951, particularly the establishment of the Xizang Autonomous Region in 1965, production increased until the mid-1990s.

Around this time, an influx of cheap, machine-made carpets severely impacted the market for handmade Tibetan rugs, forcing many artisans to abandon their craft. Young people were deterred from the industry due to the intricacy of the process and the long apprenticeship. "It took me at least three years to master all the skills when I was young," Nyima Tashi said.


**A handmade Tibetan rug produced by Pangyenmedo** (Photo Courtesy of Tseten Sherpa)

Now there is a revival in Tibetan rugmaking, due to more government support, interest from tourists and innovation from carpet manufacturers. Brands leverage social media to increase marketing, and rugs are showcased in art and home furnishing exhibitions in big cities.

With this renewed appreciation of their value, Tibetan rugs are popular for upscale home furnishings and as collectibles. This gives them a bigger role in boosting the local economy and more importantly, spreading Tibetan culture.

"We feel obliged to carry on the craftsmanship and revitalise it. To us it's not only a product but also an important part of Tibetan culture, reflecting Tibetan people's religious beliefs, aesthetic values and daily customs," said Tseten Sherpa, owner of Pangyenmedo Industrial and Trading Company, a Tibetan rug manufacturer based in Chushur County of Lhasa.

## Revitalising an Industry

A pioneer in preserving Tibetan rug weaving and revitalising the industry was Kesang Tashi (1943-2021), an ethnic Tibetan originally from the Shangri-La region in Southwest China's Yunnan Province, which borders Xizang. Having attended university and grad school in the US and then working in banking, Tashi became interested in sustainability and conservation, returning to China to establish Khawachen in Lhasa in 1994, among many other projects he established, including a tea business and an eco-hotel.

"At that time, he saw that established carpet producers in Xizang made mainly old-fashioned carpets in terms of patterns and designs, not in line with international aesthetics. Nepal had become the main carpet exporter," Zheng Yi, one of Kesang Tashi's nephews, told *ChinaReport*.

Kesang Tashi travelled the region to find skilled artisans from traditional carpet-making centres, eventually employing around 150 rug makers. Some of them, master artisans now, still work in the enterprise. He wanted to ensure every rug they made was an artwork.

At its peak, Kesang Tashi exhibited Khawachen's products overseas, including in the US and UK, establishing a global company to sell them. It was one of the first companies in Xizang to export Tibetan rugs in the 1990s.

"I'd never imagined the carpets I wove would go out into the world," said Nyima Tashi, adding that the quality expectations for exported carpets are very high, which has trained them to be extremely careful with every piece of work as a result.

Kesang Tashi sought an international design team to innovate traditional patterns, based on wide research to suit the tastes of overseas consumers. "Khawachen proved more able at breaking through the traditions," Zheng said.

“At Khawachen, our core value is integrating traditional Tibetan culture and art with contemporary tastes and modern consumer demand,” Zheng said. One series is based on the seasons, in the style of Impressionist art. “Many designs embodied the most modern aesthetic in Tibetan rugs [when we started], but we find young people still like them today,” Zheng said.

## Artisanal Approach

Khawachen was challenged when its main export market was affected by the 2008 financial crisis. Meanwhile, workers’ wages rose rapidly in the early 2000s, leading to soaring labour costs. The number of employees dropped from nearly 300 in the 1990s to less than 30 today.

But Zheng noted that the decline of the handicraft industry is a global phenomenon, an inevitable result of rapid economic development.

Khawachen’s annual output dropped to below 1 million yuan (US$139,400) after 2008, but it has risen to 4 million yuan (US$557,500) since Zheng took the helm. Some 20 percent of its products, customised as high-end furniture products, are exported to countries like the US and Japan. “There’s no worry about sales. Demand is greater than we can supply,” Zheng said.

Using machines is a big temptation, but Khawachen insists its products are completely handmade. “Handwork has warmth and is personalised. That’s where you find the value of Tibetan rugs. The bedrock of our business will be damaged if we use machines,” Zheng told *ChinaReport*. He realises Khawachen’s capacity is limited by lack of artisans.

Zheng has taken a sharp career turn since he took over at Khawachen in 2022, coming from finance and real estate. But he is increasingly aware of the merit of traditional handicrafts and is dedicated to breathing new life into the plateau’s art and craft traditions.

“I’ll continue Kesang Tashi’s legacy. In the future, we’ll do more to modernise traditional patterns and techniques, or represent the traditional craftsmanship with a more modern language,” Zheng said. He added that Khawachen’s mission is to build a Tibetan-origin lifestyle brand with global appeal.

Capturing young consumers is key. Khawachen uses social media channels such as short-video platforms Douyin and RedNote to promote rugs and exhibitions in big cities like Shanghai. “It’s important to let young people appreciate the value of traditional rugs like those Khawachen makes,” Zheng said.

Since the summer of 2023, social media has attracted visitors to their factory, built around a courtyard which has not changed since the enterprise was established. These visitors include not only tourists and influencers, but also Tibetan carpet lovers and college students and scholars interested in ethnic culture.

“Letting people approach, step into the courtyard, witness how a Tibetan carpet comes to life is perhaps the very first step towards its rebirth,” Zheng said. He believes that traditional Tibetan carpets will continue to hold great value in days to come.

**A handmade Tibetan rug depicting a yak-racing scene made by Khawachen hangs in a room** (Photo Courtesy of Zheng Yi)

## Modern Tastes

Like Khawachen, many traditional Tibetan rug producers in Xizang remain committed to producing handcrafted rugs while adapting to modern tastes.

Tseten Sherpa, a citizen of Nepal who is originally from Nyalam County in Xizang, said he has been interested in rugs ever since he used to watch his parents weave in the family workshop. He learned the skill as a teenager and had a business in Nepal before moving it to Xizang in 2004, he told *ChinaReport*.

Making Tibetan rugs involves dozens of meticulous steps from combing, spinning, dyeing, winding, hand weaving and trimming to the final washing and flattening.

“It requires a lot of manpower if it’s all done by hand,” Tseten said.

Traditional Tibetan rugs use only wool produced from sheep in northern

**Tibetan women dressed in traditional costume from a cooperative in Shannan, southwestern Xizang, showcase traditional carpet weaving techniques at the second Xizang Tibetan Carpet Expo in Lhasa, January 11, 2018** (Photo by CNS)

Xizang at high altitudes, and natural dyes derived from plants and minerals, and this practice is still adhered to, Tseten said.

Weaving a rug of 90 by 190 centimetres takes 15-45 days even for a skilled artisan. The time varies according to knot density, which refers to the number of lines per unit width, an important indicator of a carpet's quality, according to Tseten.

Internal and external changes in the late 1990s caused a decline in the carpet industry in Xizang, from the improvement in living standards and better work opportunities, to an influx of cheaper machine-made carpets. Changes to nomadic lifestyles meant less need for thick rugs. A machine-made carpet cost at most several hundred yuan while a similar-sized Tibetan rug might cost 10 times as much.

When Tseten built his factory in Lhasa in 2004, there were at least 16 traditional carpet producers in Xizang, he recalled. Now only a few remain.

Tseten believes the factories closed mainly due to a lack of skilled workers. People had more choices as the economy developed. The intricate craftsmanship and lengthy training required mean the younger generation are hesitant to pursue the tradition. "Old craftsmen can't sit all day anymore and young people don't want to do this hard and tiring job," Tseten said.

The cost of labour has soared too. "Twenty years ago, one worker was paid only 150 yuan (US$21) a month. Now salaries have risen to around 5,000 yuan (US$697)," he said.

"Many factories don't do research and development to improve their products, sticking to the most traditional ones. But if they don't innovate, there'll be no chance for development," Tseten said.

Taking out bank loans in 2008, he started buying new machinery to improve efficiency. From 2010, some processes were automated, including wool washing, spinning and dyeing.

"Machines can wash 10 tons of wool a day. That's impossible by hand," Tseten said. But the essential processes which give Tibetan carpets their value, such as weaving and carpet washing, are still done by hand.

To produce higher quality carpets, the company has been refining materials and techniques. Silk is added to some rugs to make them thinner, tailored to the taste of Europeans.

The knot density of its Tibetan carpets has increased, first from 60 to 80, then to 100 and 150. "Next we'll make carpets with a knot density of 200. It will be very thin, like a Persian rug," Tseten said.

His company Pangyenmedo has made immense efforts to innovate colours and patterns to the taste of foreign consumers who are mainly from Europe and the US.

"We have a German design team, and they keep a close eye on popular colours and patterns in Europe. We design 50-100 new patterns a year to meet the demands of customers from both China and abroad," Tseten said. "Americans might prefer traditional patterns with distinct Tibetan characteristics. But Europeans might like simple and modern designs. We try to adapt to what customers want without compromising traditional techniques," he added.

From 2008 until 2020, when the pandemic hit, his company's revenue rose on average by 5-10 percent year-on-year, Tseten said.

At present, Pangyenmedo's annual output of Tibetan rugs is about 45 million yuan (US$6.3m), accounting for over half of its business, which includes exporting wool to Nepal and producing traditional white Tibetan scarves, known as *khata*.

One of the leading rug producers in Xizang, their products are mainly sold in domestic markets like Beijing and Shanghai where "people know the value of Tibetan rugs," while 30 percent are exported.

Today, Tibetan rugs made in Xizang have earned a solid reputation abroad, according to Tseten. “Many will only buy one when they see the word ‘Tibetan carpet’ on it,” he told *ChinaReport*.

**Pangyenmedo employees wind yarn outside their factory, Chushur County, Lhasa, 2018**
(Photo Courtesy of Tseten Sherpa)

## Fresh Ideas

The vigorous development of the carpet industry attracts more young people to the business, who infuse traditional crafts with fresh ideas and fashionable aesthetics.

In 2014, Tenzin Trinley, an architecture graduate born in the 1990s, gave up a stable job as a civil servant to establish a cooperative in his hometown Gyangze, a traditional craft centre.

Tenzin Trinley found that traditional Tibetan rugs were being vastly outsold by new machine-made products, meaning that many artisans had to leave home to find work. “It’s so sad to see these precious techniques are at risk of being lost,” he told *ChinaReport*.

Combining his knowledge of architectural design and traditional weaving, Tenzin Trinley developed a technique for weaving rugs with 3D effects. His team digitised the rug pattern design process, replacing manual methods, significantly improving efficiency and precision.

This technology allows them to customise Tibetan carpet based on photos customers provide. Their goal is to integrate modern and diverse elements into Tibetan rugs to attract buyers, he said.

These enterprises have a wider societal value, providing non-profit training programmes, helping more people learn traditional skills and creating job opportunities for farmers and herders.

Between 2019 and 2022, Pangyenmedo alone held more than 10 training sessions, benefitting over 1,000 participants. Over 400 individuals obtained official certification and many found employment in enterprises or started their own businesses.

Wool purchasing has boosted the income of farmers and herders in Nagqu, Ngari Prefecture and Xigaze. Apart from buying wool from herders across the region, Pangyenmedo provides seasonal employment for some 300 people to do tasks such as wool sorting every year. The factory calculates it spends around 60 million yuan (US$8.4m) annually buying and sorting wool, and pays a combined 2.6 million yuan (US$362,385) to its seasonal workers over a four-month period.

## Protection and Inheritance

“Carpet factories have retained traditional production techniques and they play an important role in passing down and protecting the craftsmanship,” said Phuntsok Thondup from the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Centre of Xizang based in Lhasa.

As equipment and patterns have improved, they can create products according to different needs and budgets. “Local residents believe rugs are only for sitting on. We never imagined they could be hung in hotels as decorations or in museums as an artwork,” Phuntsok Thondup said.

Regional authorities have done much to assist factories to improve facilities and techniques.

Since 2003, Xizang has been fully committed to promoting the development of the Tibetan carpet industry by allocating land, providing financial support and tax incentives, encouraging technological upgrades and guiding coordinated regional development. These efforts have laid a solid foundation for the long-term development of the Tibetan carpet sector.

The traditional knot-tying weaving technique for Tibetan rugs that originated in Gyangze was added to China’s national intangible cultural heritage

Courtesy of Khawachen

**A Tibetan carpet vendor's booth draws a large crowd at the Xizang Domestic and International Commodity Fair, Lhasa, May 4, 2023**
(Photo by CNS)

(ICH) list in 2006. Since then, the government has opened ICH workshops, provided non-profit training classes and subsidies, and encouraged carpet factories to join domestic and international exhibitions.

In 2007, the region started to certify inheritors of intangible cultural heritage including Tibetan rug weaving, according to Phuntsok Thondup. Certified inheritors are given grants to ensure the intergenerational transmission of traditional crafts. A nationally recognised inheritor can get a subsidy of 20,000 yuan (US$2,785) a year while a regionally recognised inheritor could get 10,000 (US$1,400) a year, he said.

Gyangze Carpet Factory, which was built in 1973, was designated a national ICH productive protection demonstration base in 2011, and in 2017, regional cultural authorities allocated 6.5 million yuan (US$906,000) to the factory, which they used to construct two modern factory buildings.

Lhaphun, manager of Gyangze Carpet Factory, told media in 2023 that the factory was well-equipped, with 60 skilled workers working flat out to keep up with their orders, which are sold across China and exported. In 2019, the factory's output had already reached 2.3 million yuan (US$320,570).

Government subsidies have allowed Khawachen to digitalise weaving patterns using software to aid design, a great improvement to efficiency, manager Zheng Yi said.

According to the ICH division of the Department of Culture and Tourism of Xizang, between 2012 and 2024, some 473 million yuan (US$65.9m) was invested by the central and regional governments to support ICH protection. A relatively comprehensive ICH listing system has been established in Xizang, with 2,760 recognised projects, 1,790 officially designated inheritors and 159 intangible cultural heritage (ICH) training bases. Among them, 106 projects and 117 inheritors are on the national ICH list.

In 2018, Xizang launched a plan to revitalise traditional crafts such as rug weaving, opera mask making, thangka painting and Tibetan incense making, among others. The plan aims to strengthen quality, branding and market awareness among traditional craft practitioners, promote the development of renowned local brands and support young artisans through mentorship by masters and experts.

The traditional crafts industry has developed rapidly, which is also due to the robust development of Xizang's tourism economy. In 2003, there were only 108 registered ethnic craft enterprises in the region, with output totaling 145 million yuan (US$20.2m) and 9,600 practitioners, according to an article in the *Journal of Xizang University* published in 2006. By September 2023, there were more than 2,500 registered ethnic craft enterprises, with over 34,000 people engaged in the trade.

In April 2024, the Xizang Tibetan Carpet Association was established. Tseten expects it will bring Xizang rug companies together to improve development. "Together, we could at least hold a few exhibitions annually," he said. He is also applying to open a Tibetan rug showroom in the industrial park where the factory is, which will show how carpets are made and the story behind the craft.

Tseten plans to renovate his 20-year-old factory starting in 2026. But they will not move too fast. "We'll move forward steadily, one step at a time, and focus on refining the product. My wish is to develop it into a century-old brand," he said. He would like regional authorities to pay more attention to the industry that he believes is green, sustainable and will create job opportunities.

Zheng Yi is confident the market for Tibetan rugs will only get better. He plans to concentrate more on exporting through e-commerce platforms and is considering cooperating with internationally known designers and artists.

He also wants to transform his studio courtyard into a centre for Tibetan culture and art, in cooperation with other art institutions, given that it is already on the tourist trail.

"That is our first small attempt in this direction," he said, pointing to a café in the courtyard where several young people were enjoying coffee as they admired the Tibetan carpets hanging on the wall.★

Xizang 60th Anniversary

# MORE THAN WORDS

## Developments in bilingual education, ancient text research and modern technology are enabling young people in Xizang Autonomous Region to preserve and promote their language and culture in and beyond the Tibetan Plateau

By Wu Jin

"I don't have a concrete plan for my future yet," 22-year-old Dampa Gyantsen from Xizang Autonomous Region told *ChinaReport*. "But whatever it may be, pursuing a PhD or taking the civil service exam, working back in Xizang is my top choice."

A master's candidate in Chinese philology at Xizang Minzu University (XMU) in Shaanxi Province, Gyantsen is also fluent in standard Chinese. "You can't expect to make friends or impress interviewers anywhere outside Xizang without speaking standard Chinese," he told *ChinaReport*. "But I always speak Tibetan with my family and my Tibetan classmates." Dampa Gyantsen said he is also proud that his bilingual skills allow him to share Tibetan festivals, customs and

**Students attend a Tibetan calligraphy class at Gyaca Middle School, Gyaca County, Shannan City, Xizang Autonomous Region** (Photo by CNS) literature with non-Tibetan peers.

"Today, younger generations in Xizang, even those in remote areas, have a good command of both Standard Chinese and Tibetan. Some can even communicate in three or more languages," Su Faxiang, professor at the School of Ethnology and Sociology, Minzu University of China in Beijing, told *ChinaReport*.

More than 70 years ago, learning to read and write in Tibetan was the starting point for education in Xizang, where the illiteracy rate was 95 percent. After Xizang's peaceful liberation in 1951, the first primary schools opened to all local students. Since then, Tibetan has been taught as a core subject and used in instruction at primary and secondary levels.

Bilingual education in standard Chinese and Tibetan has also been encouraged and promoted since then. Over the decades Tibetan has remained the primary language of instruction in elementary schools and a core subject along with standard Chinese in elementary and middle schools, particularly in all pastoral areas and some urban schools. According to the region's Department of Education, by February 2021, the bilingual education programme had been implemented across all primary, middle and high schools in Xizang. It offers students like Gyantsen more life options and a broader platform to share their voices.

Many Tibetan students, especially those admitted to higher education institutions, are becoming interested in publishing in standard Chinese or even English, said Yin Weibin, deputy director and research fellow with the Department of Tibetology and Tibetan Development Studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "This allows them to reach a broader national and international readership with the rich cultural legacy of the Tibetan people," she said.

Information technology is also "directly improving Tibetan language education and boosting the promotion, inheritance and development of traditional Tibetan culture," said Long Congjun, a research fellow who specialises in digitalisation of the Tibetan language at the IEA.

**Students participate in a handcraft class at Lhasa No. 1 Primary School, 1956. The school, Xizang's first modern primary school, opened in 1952** (Photo by IC)

## Beyond Literacy

"Learning Tibetan is not only essential for personal growth, but also to gain a deeper understanding of our history and culture," said Jimatso, a Tibetan deputy research fellow at the IEA. With her linguistic knowledge, she is able to read ancient Tibetan manuscripts from the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, Gansu Province and decipher worn inscriptions on old stone steles.

Before Xizang's peaceful liberation in 1951, only around 2,000 monks and students from aristocratic families studied in government-funded and private schools, while 95 percent of the population, who were serfs and slaves, were denied the right to education, according to a series of white papers released by China's State Council Information Office since the 1990s.

Even XMU, Xizang's first public higher learning institution established in 1958, is located outside the region in Xianyang, Shaanxi Province – the result of local resistance to public schooling for ordinary Tibetans.

Qamdo Primary School, the first modern school within the region, was established in March 1951. Located in eastern Xizang, the school was led by Chinese scholars Li Anzhai (1900-1985), a Yale-trained anthropologist and Tibetologist, and his wife Yu Shiyu (1904-1969), a bibliographer and educator. Their academic research on Xizang's history and culture laid a foundation for the region's modern educational system, Yin told *ChinaReport*.

In January 1951, about 60 students from various backgrounds were recruited and divided into three classes to learn written Tibetan. A few months later, the school formally launched with a curriculum that included maths, basic science, art and music. By 2018, the school (now called Qamdo Experimental Primary School) had expanded to 15,268 square metres, serving 2,240 students with 151 teachers.

Classes were taught in Tibetan from the start. When the autonomous region was founded in 1965, Xizang had

56,000 primary school students, 1,359 middle school students and 12,000 adult learners among a population of more than 1.3 million, according to local educational authorities.

Huge progress has been made since then. By the end of 2014, the illiteracy rate among young and middle-aged Tibetans had dropped to less than 0.57 percent, according to the white paper Successful Practice of Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Xizang, published by the State Council Information Office in September 2015.

"Tibetan-language education fosters a strong sense of ethnic identity and pride among Tibetan students and helps them better understand the uniqueness and value of their ethnic culture amid external influences in a globalised world," Jimatso told *ChinaReport*.

Since 1985, all tuition, food and boarding expenses for students in pastoral areas of Xizang have been fully covered by the region's government. Even earlier, free education was available for all primary and middle school students in Xizang.

In 2007, Xizang became the first region in China to offer free education to all students in the nine-year compulsory programme, one year before the policy was extended nationwide. In 2012, Xizang also became the first region in China to provide 15 years of free education, from preschool through high school. Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region followed in 2017 and Jungar Banner in Ordos, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region joined in 2025. Elsewhere in China, the nine-year compulsory education policy remains standard.

Parents can decide whether their children receive boarding services. Boarding students return home on weekends and holidays. At a press conference in Lhasa on March 28, Xu Zhitao, vice chairman of Xizang Autonomous Region, said the number of boarders changes yearly depending on family preference, but the curriculum is the same for both day and boarding students since they attend the same schools.

**Sixth grader Nyima Lhadron (second from left) makes tsampa, a staple food made from barley flour, with classmates at Baingoin County Sinopec Primary School, Nagqu, Xizang Autonomous Region, October 13, 2023. The school has more than 1,300 students and provides boarding for a majority of its students in grades 4 to 6** (Photo by CNS)

Ngawang Wangdrak, head teacher of a primary school in Nagqu at an elevation of 4,750 metres, told China News Service in December 2024 that half of the school's 1,343 students board due to the long distances between home and school. To foster personal interests, the school offers extracurricular courses – paintings and handicrafts made by students decorate the classroom walls.

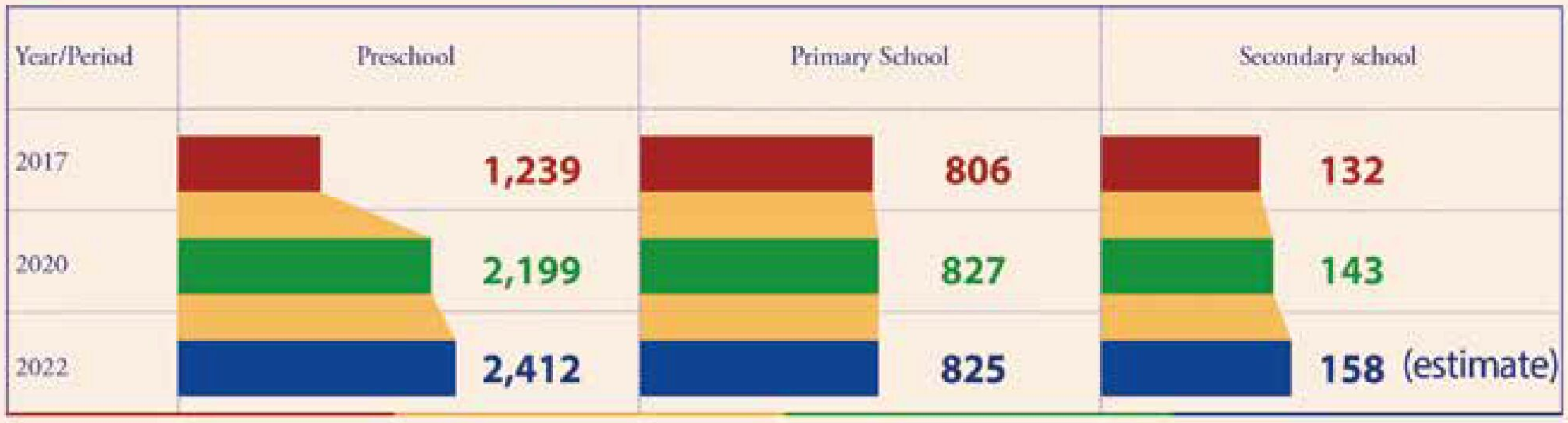
By 2024, Xizang's gross enrollment rate for preschool education reached 91.33 percent, the completion rate for nine-year compulsory education hit 97.86 percent and the gross enrollment rate for senior high school reached 91.56 percent, according to the white paper Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era, released in March by the State Council Information Office.

## Speaking Volumes

Whether Han or Tibetan, teachers were encouraged to learn each other's language, said Pema, a former teacher at Qamdo Primary School, in the *Oral History of Xizang's Contemporary Breakthroughs*, published by China Tibetology Publishing House in 2012.

Cultural exchange, including mutual language learning between Tibetans and Han, has a long history. The earliest known Tibetan-Han dictionary was discovered among literature from the Dunhuang Grottoes in the early 20th century and dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), according to Professor Wang Baohong at the School of Literature at XMU, in an academic paper from 2022.

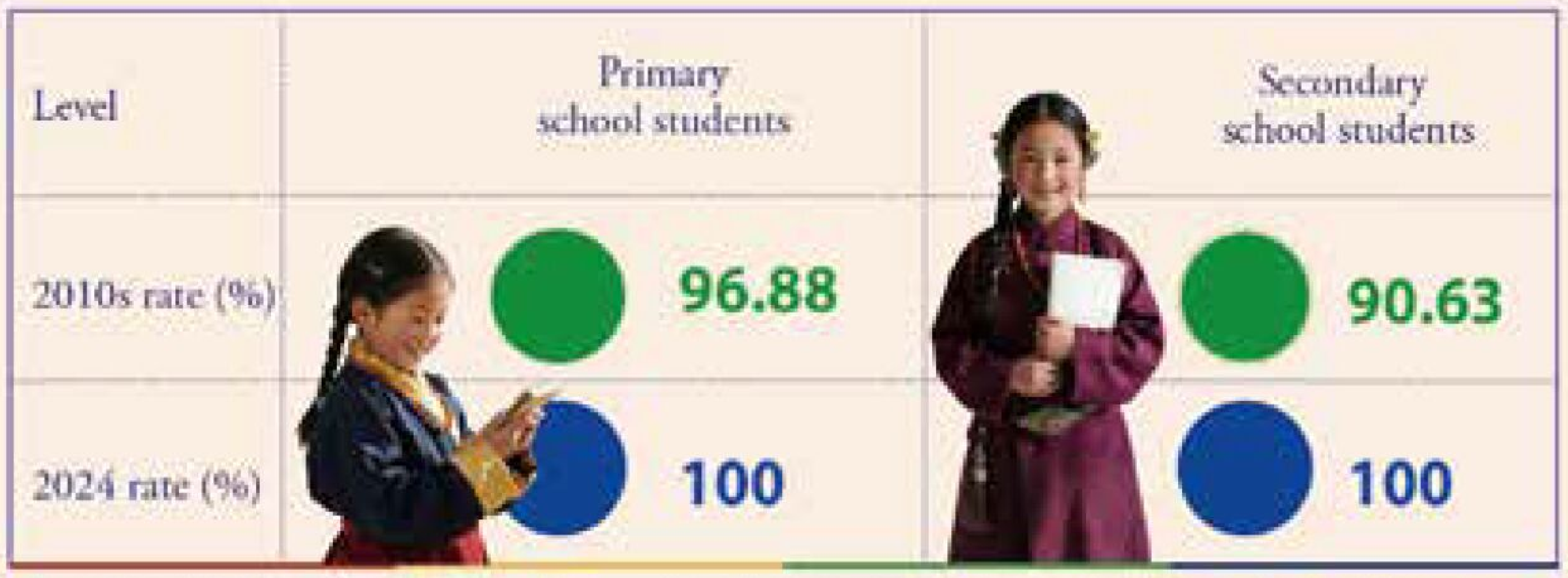
## Number of Schools in Xizang



| Year/Period | Preschool | Primary School | Secondary school |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2017 | 1,239 | 806 | 132 |
| 2020 | 2,199 | 827 | 143 |
| 2022 | 2,412 | 825 | 158 (estimate) |

Sources: White paper Democratic Reform in Xizang-Sixty Years On (2019)by the State Council Information Office (SCIO),white paper Xizang Since 1951: Liberation Development and Prosperity (2021)by the SCIO,Xizang Autonomous Region Department of Education and China Central Television (CCTV)

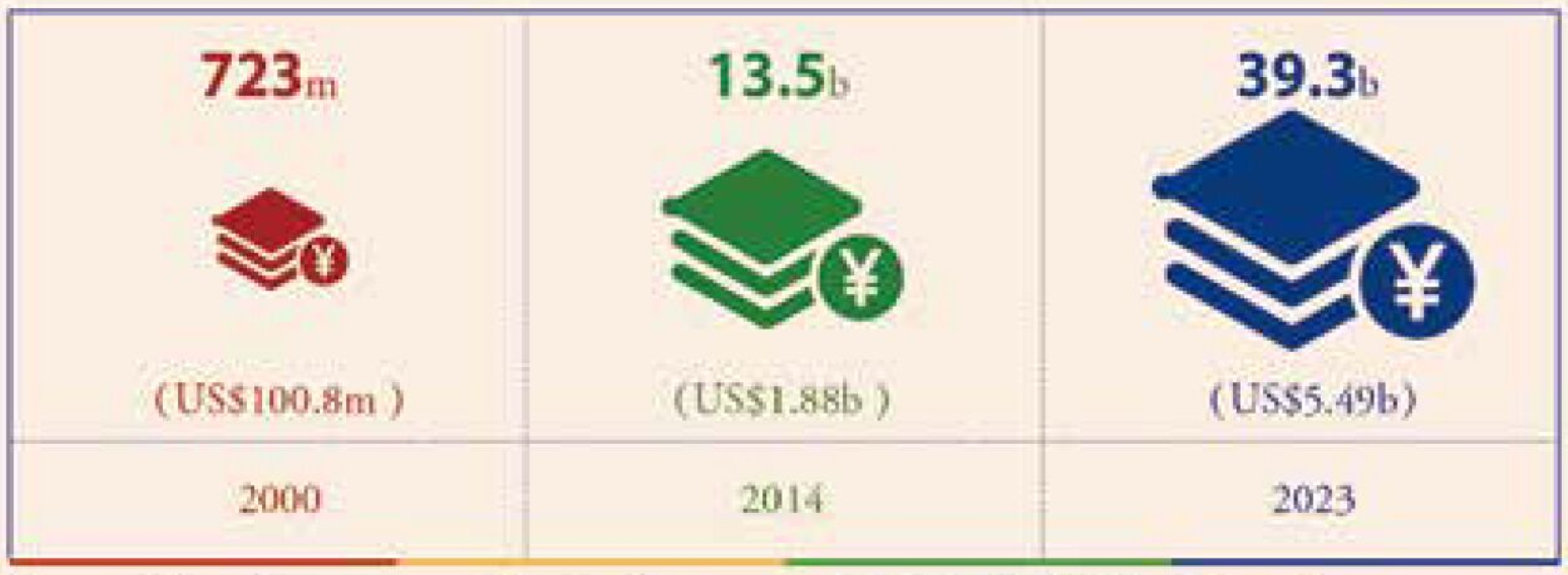
## Bilingual Education Coverage



| Level | Primary school students | Secondary school students |
|---|---|---|
| 2010s rate (%) | 96.88 | 90.63 |
| 2024 rate (%) | 100 | 100 |

Sources: White paper The Development and Progress in Xizang (2013)by the SCIO and Xizang Autonomous Region Department of Education

## Regional Government Education Investment



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 723m | 13.5b | 39.3b |
| (US$100.8m ) | (US$1.88b ) | (US$5.49b) |
| 2000 | 2014 | 2023 |

Source: Xizang Autonomous Region Department of Education,Xinhua News Agency

"Bilingual or multilingual education, both historically and today, is not unusual in Xizang, where the language includes many loanwords adopted through centuries of exchange," Su told *ChinaReport*.

After China's reform and opening-up in 1978, standard Chinese classes were introduced in 1982 in more densely populated areas such as Lhasa. In 1994, a bilingual teaching approach using both Tibetan and standard Chinese was officially adopted in accordance with the Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China, issued by the Ministry of Education in 1993.

Today, courses on both standard Chinese and Tibetan are taught in primary and secondary schools in Xizang.

"This bilingual approach, which meets the real needs of local communities, has significantly improved the quality of education in Xizang," Yin said.

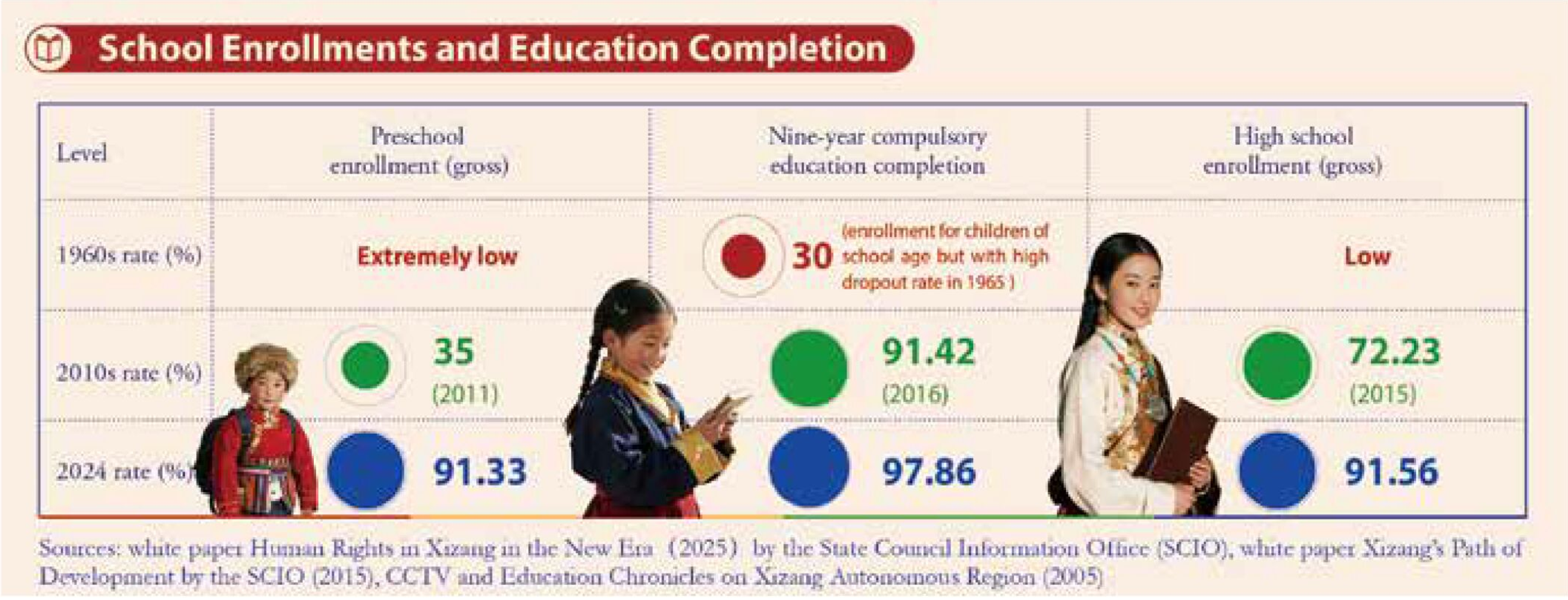
Tibetan students can choose either Tibetan or Chinese as one of their subjects in China's national college entrance exams. Both are weighted equally, with a full score of 150. In some remote areas, such as Gyacoxung Township of Sangzhuzi District, Xigaze, the local primary school devotes more time to Tibetan than Chinese and offers classes in Tibetan calligraphy to promote cultural awareness. Schools there also provide courses in Tibetan Opera, dance and thangka painting, a traditional Buddhist art.

According to Dampa Gyantsen, both Tibetan and standard Chinese are essential for younger generations in Xizang who aim to work in fast-growing sectors such as tourism. "It's great if they can speak standard Chinese, since Han tourists are the second-largest group in Xizang, after Tibetan tourists," he told *ChinaReport*.

"Most Tibetan students at XMU return to their hometowns, partly because of the strong local government subsidies and partly due to ethnic

**Students demonstrate their computer programming projects at Nyainrong County Middle School, Nagqu, Xizang Autonomous Region, October 25, 2024. The school provides extracurricular classes including coding, 3D modeling, Tibetan lute and choir** (Photo by CNS)

**A Tibetan artisan carves an illustration into a printing block for a Tibetan Buddhist sutra at Xuedui Bai Vocational Technical School, Lhasa, Xizang Autonomous Region, May 8, 2023** (Photo by CNS)



School Enrollments and Education Completion

| Level | Preschool enrollment (gross) | Nine-year compulsory education completion | High school enrollment (gross) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1960s rate (%) | Extremely low | 30 (enrollment for children of school age but with high dropout rate in 1965 ) | Low |
| 2010s rate (%) | 35<br>(2011) | 91.42<br>(2016) | 72.23<br>(2015) |
| 2024 rate (%) | 91.33 | 97.86 | 91.56 |

Sources: white paper Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era (2025) by the State Council Information Office (SCIO), white paper Xizang's Path of Development by the SCIO (2015), CCTV and Education Chronicles on Xizang Autonomous Region (2005)

solidarity," said Professor Wang.

Bilingual skills open doors for both employment and cultural exchange. At XMU, Zhao Jianjie, a lecturer at the School of Literature, has plans to invite Tibetan students to translate the *Book of Songs*, a compiled collection of ancient Chinese poems from between (1046-476 BCE), into Tibetan.

For Jimatso, scoring high in both Tibetan and Chinese on the national college entrance exam made it possible for her to leave her hometown in Northwest China's Qinghai Province two decades ago to study in Beijing, where she became a scholar of ancient Tibetan scripts.

"Rather than undermining the indigenous language, linguistic diversity can promote the development of Tibetan culture," Su said.

## Text and Context

With over 1,400 years of history, the Tibetan language is central to the ethnic group's solidarity and daily life. Over the past decades, it has been widely studied and used within the community, supported and strengthened by national laws and protection projects.

According to the Chinese Constitution adopted in 1954, all ethnic groups in China have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages. The Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy, which took effect in 1984, further stipulates that when the majority of students at an educational institution belong to a particular ethnic

group, their language should be taught and used in instruction.

In addition, local regulations on learning, using and developing the Tibetan language (first issued in 1987 and later amended in 2002 and 2019) require that all resolutions, laws and regulations passed by People's Congresses at all levels in Xizang, as well as all official government documents, be issued in both Tibetan and Chinese. The rules encourage Tibetan language education, publishing and broadcasting, especially targetting children and general readers. Bilingual signs are now ubiquitous across public facilities, including schools, libraries, restaurants and hotels. In 1997, an international-standard Tibetan character code was approved by the International Standards Organisation, making the Tibetan script the first ethnic minority script in China with an international standard.

Tibetan must also be used in judicial proceedings and legal documents when the parties involved are Tibetan, according to white papers released by the State Council Information Office.

To help preserve and promote cultural legacies, the Language Commission of Xizang Autonomous Region (formerly the Tibetan Language Work Guide Commission) was established in 1988. Over the following two decades, more than 100 translation institutions were founded, involving nearly 1,000 Tibetan-language translators, the white paper revealed.

In addition, the *Epic of King Gesar*, the millennium-old Tibetan epic, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

In 2013, China launched a major cultural project: *The Library of Chinese Classics: Tibetan Volume*. The plan spans 15 years and aims to collect and publish major Tibetan literary works from the Tubo Kingdom (618-842) through to the peaceful liberation of Xizang in 1951. This project marks a milestone in preserving and promoting Tibetan traditional culture, according to the 2023 State Council white paper Policies of the Communist Party of China on the Governance of Xizang in the New Era: Approaches and Achievements.

Jimatso believes the discovery and study of ancient Tibetan texts play an "indispensable role" in promoting the language's inheritance and development today. She told *ChinaReport* that a more accurate understanding of ancient Tibetan helps trace the language's evolution. These texts contain historical narratives, religious practices and cultural customs, all of which are valuable to Tibetan identity. Their context also sparks interest among students to continue learning the language.

Recently, the Han-Tibetan version of the Modern Chinese Dictionary was jointly published by China Tibetology Publishing House and The Commercial Press.

Social media is also contributing to Tibetan language education and cultural development. "Numerous short videos made by Tibetan university students are uploaded to Douyin to showcase the region's landscapes, customs and everyday life. Videos teaching daily Tibetan phrases are also being shared on social media," Long told *ChinaReport*.

Even online standard Chinese buzzwords are being translated into Tibetan, a trend that Jimatso supports. "These new Tibetan terms enrich the vocabulary," she said, "They're created by people in daily life and are often more vivid and imaginative than anything scholars like me could come up with."

Through advances in tech, Tibetan researchers are documenting endangered dialects while others are broadening the culture's boundaries. "With the adoption of AI to read ancient Tibetan texts and design indigenous artworks, young people in the ethnic group can confidently inherit and promote Tibetan culture in the modern era," professor Su Faxiang said.★

**Students from folk music troupes at Tibet Sakya County Middle School, Xigaze, Xizang Autonomous Region, perform at the school on June 21, 2023. The school offers extracurricular classes in the arts, culture and computer science** (Photo by CNS)

## Virtual Power Plants

# Circuit Makers

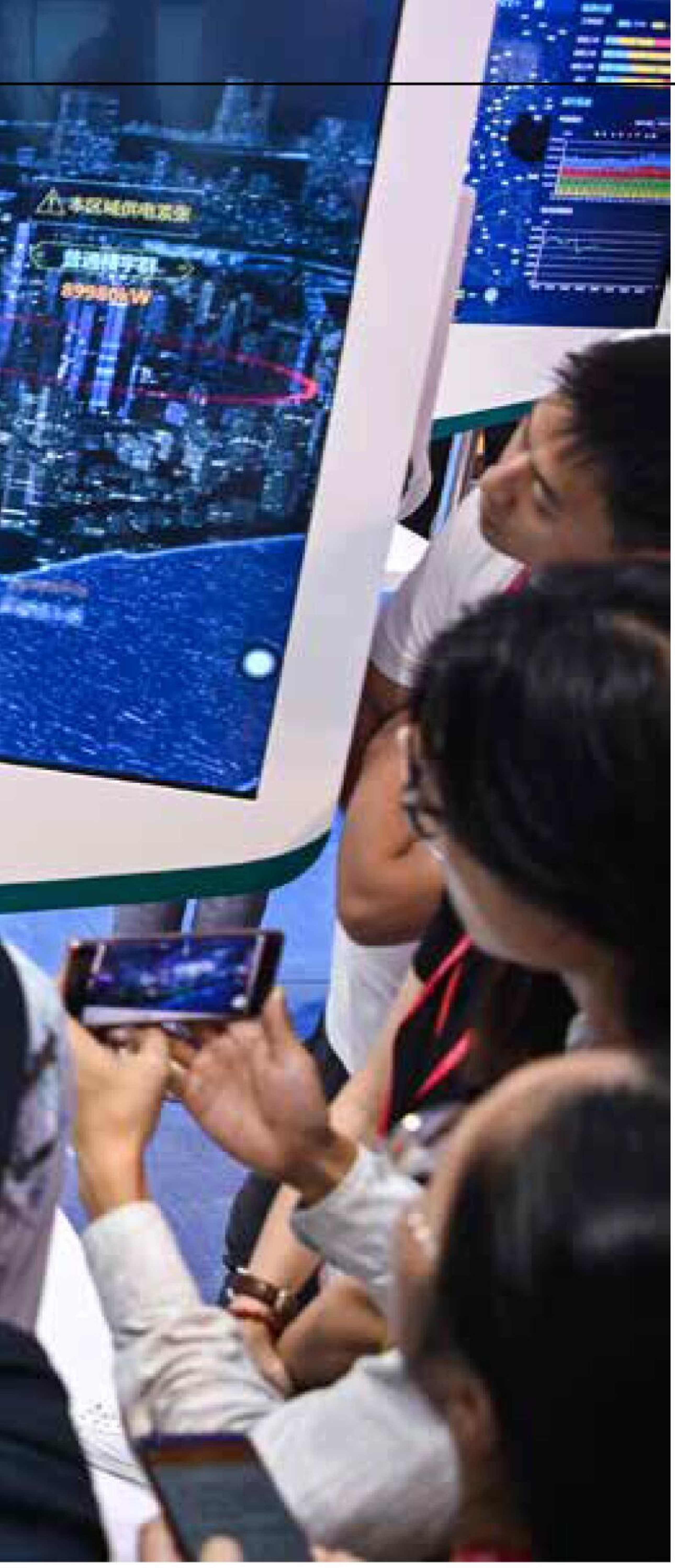
**China is adopting virtual power plants to integrate dispersed renewable energy and stabilise the grid. But uncertain profitability, market fragmentation and the absence of a mature spot energy market challenge large-scale commercialisation**

By Chen Weishan

China's combined installed capacity for wind and solar power surpassed that of coal power by the end of the first quarter of this year, according to a report released on April 25 by the China Electricity Council, the country's energy body. The report predicts that non-fossil fuel power generation capacity will account for over 60 percent of total installed capacity by the end of 2025, with the share of coal power falling to about one-third by year end.

It marks a milestone development in China's efforts to fulfill its dual carbon goals, peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. But as the ratio of renewable energy in the power system increases, it is becoming more challenging to maintain the stability of China's energy system, given the randomness, intermittency and volatility of wind and solar.

In recent years, China has started to turn to virtual power plants (VPP) for a solution. A VPP, as its name suggests, has no physical plant. It is a digital system that aggregates and manages distributed energy resources through software, including flexible electrical loads, rooftop solar, energy storage systems and electric vehicle charging infrastructure.



A guide introduces visitors to Shanghai's virtual power plant for commercial buildings at the World Artificial Intelligence Conference 2019 in Shanghai, August 28, 2019 (Photo by VCG)

Zhou Feng, a manager of the Clean Power Programme at Energy Foundation China (EF China), a non-profit organisation focusing on advancing sustainable energy development, told *ChinaReport* that a VPP acts as a platform to combine scattered energy resources, such as small-scale power sources or flexible demand, into a coordinated, controllable system. This helps improve grid reliability and supports renewable energy use.

The exact role of a VPP depends on the types of resources it manages. For example, if it includes many adjustable power loads or storage systems, it can significantly enhance energy supply stability.

## National Strategy

Several major cities and provinces have already launched VPP platforms. But the development of VPPs was not on the national policy agenda until recently.

In April, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China's top economic planner, and the National Energy Administration (NEA), the country's top energy regulator, released a guideline on "accelerating the development of VPPs." The long-awaited policy document clarified the sector's development roadmap, emphasising that improving power market mechanisms will be the driving force of its development.

According to Zhou Feng, the guideline aligns with the market-oriented electricity pricing reform launched in February and is intended to help VPP operators generate adequate profits by participating in power markets, paving the way for its large-scale adoption throughout the country.

However, given the differences in desired outcomes between local governments, who prioritise power supply stability, and VPP operators and potential participants, who are mostly driven by profit, the widespread commercialisation of VPPs remains a distant reality.

## Uncertain Profits

Globally, virtual power plants are classed into three types: load-based which manages electricity demand, generation-based which manages distributed power sources, and hybrid, a mix of both. Currently, load-based virtual power plants are the most common in China.

According to Zhang Yongping, director of EF China's Clean Power Programme, the primary incentive for local governments to support the establishment of VPPs is to ensure an adequate and stable power supply. "There is always the challenge of seasonal power shortages, such as during peak summer demand. To ensure supply, local governments have two options: increase stable power sources such as building coal power projects, or reduce electricity consumption during peak times," Zhang said. As new coal power plants are becoming less desirable, the latter option is where VPPs can step in.

The result is that most VPPs in China today remain confined to demand response, which involves encouraging electricity users to temporarily reduce or shift consumption during peak periods in exchange for compensation or subsidies.

Shenzhen, a megacity in South China's Guangdong Province, now has the country's largest VPP. Operated by State-owned China Southern Power Grid, it integrates 59 operators with a total of 3,800 megawatts of power capacity, including 840 megawatts of real-time adjustable load, equivalent to the capacity of a large coal-fired unit.

"Shenzhen's virtual power plant is mainly based on the demand response model," Rao Yiran, president of Shenzhen-based KZ Cloud, a VPP solution provider, told *ChinaReport*. "Each time it initiates demand response, it can adjust an energy load of about 200 megawatts, which is a significant amount for peak demand management in the city." Rao said that the platform handled two instances of demand response during peak demand in July and October 2023.

However, the problem is that demand response is episodic, leading to unpredictable and inadequate economic returns for participants. In 2024, for example, the Yangtze River Delta did not experience significant power shortages. Jiangsu, one of China's most prosperous provinces, only initiated demand response on one day in 2024.

Even in 2022, when many provinces experienced power shortages at peak times and initiated more frequent demand responses, the revenue generated for operators was limited. According to data released by the Zhejiang Provincial

Development and Reform Commission, the province initiated demand response 16 times in July and August 2022, which resulted in 438,300 instances of user participation – one user potentially participating multiple times.

These events collectively reduced peak grid load by 52 million kilowatts, with authorities offering subsidies amounting to 546 million yuan (US$76m), or 1,246 yuan (US$174) on average per user.

"It means that for a participating enterprise with 1 to 2 megawatts of flexible load, annual earnings from participating in a VPP may be less than 100,000 yuan (US$13,940), barely enough to cover the cost of connecting to the virtual power plant," Zhou Feng said.

For many enterprises, this inconsistency highlights the limits of demand response as a sustainable business model. Even where capacity subsidies exist, they are often too small to justify investment.

Some provinces have started to provide subsidies to VPPs for just being available, even if they are not used. But the amounts are very limited. In the four months of peak electricity consumption in 2023, the provincial government of Zhejiang provided subsidies of 14.5 million yuan (US$2m) to local VPPs, amounting to less than 10,000 yuan (US$1,394) for each participant.

"[Under the current policy], it is very difficult for VPPs to generate stable, long-term revenue through participation in demand response programmes," Zhou said.

## Beyond Demand Response

The consensus among energy experts regarding VPP development is that there must be a sustainable business model to achieve financial viability. "The key issue is how to expand the profit pool so that all participants receive a fair share of the returns," Zhang Yongping said.

For Zhou Feng, the focus on developing VPPs must go beyond ensuring the stability of power supply. Zhou hopes that the emphasis on market mechanisms in the guideline issued by the central government in April could provide new momentum to establish a market-based model.

Compared to China, some countries have far more mature VPP markets. In Germany, VPPs are fully commercial and companies like Next Kraftwerke have networked thousands of electricity producers, consumers and storage facilities, which can generate revenue through multiple sources such as grid services, energy arbitrage (buying power at low prices and selling it when demand is high) and regulatory reserves.

中国华能
CHINA HUANENG
华能湖北虚拟电厂聚合调控中心

China Huaneng Group, a leading electricity generation enterprises in China, officially puts its virtual power plant on line, Wuhan, Hubei Province, September 3, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

In the US, demand response programmes remain a core function of VPPs. However, VPPs there can participate in capacity markets and are paid for just being available. In some states, VPPs are allowed to offer tailored energy packages to customers directly.

The major hurdle for the commercialisation of VPPs in China is the absence of a liberalised energy market. Currently, the price of electricity is determined through a mixed system that includes both government-administered pricing and market-based mechanisms.

While the government has started to gradually liberalise the energy market, only a few provinces, including Shanxi and Shandong, have established electricity spot markets that allow VPPs to participate on a regular basis.

Zhang Qiang, vice general manager of Huagong New Energy Technology, a VPP operator, told *ChinaReport* that VPPs have great potential if the electricity market is liberalised.

"We mainly aggregate two types of resources," Zhang said. "One comes from large industrial and commercial users, which often have energy-intensive equipment that can shift production to off-peak hours. The other is energy storage, which is the best tool for balancing supply and demand. But storage deployed by industrial and commercial enterprises for their own energy backup and potential energy sale is still in the early stages of market adoption and remains limited."

"Right now," Zhang added, "most companies have little understanding of VPPs. They may have thought about saving energy and cutting costs, but not through participating in the electricity market. And the market mechanism itself is still underdeveloped. Even if VPP operators sign deals with companies, it could take two or three years before they see any return. The promised benefits are mostly estimates, and the current returns are too small to attract much interest."

For energy experts like Zhou Feng, China should speed up energy pricing reform to establish electricity spot markets in all provinces and regions that allow new types of participants, including VPPs, to take part in.

Zhou believes that the April guideline will encourage provinces to tailor their development plans to local conditions. Given the diverse energy structures across regions, power markets vary significantly.

In coal-rich provinces like Shanxi, the focus is on valley filling, which is making use of excess renewable energy during low-demand periods. Meanwhile, in the Yangtze Delta area, which has yet to launch a spot market, the focus is oriented towards peak shaving, a method to reduce consumption during periods of high demand.

These differences shape how virtual power plants are designed and deployed. Valley-filling markets, where demand is relatively low and renewable energy output is high, often experience large price differentials. This creates stronger incentives for VPPs to absorb surplus electricity during off-peak hours.

There are signs the reform is gradually expanding. In November 2024, Zhejiang Power Exchange Centre said the province would, "at an appropriate time," allow new market participants, such as grid-side energy storage and virtual power plants, to join spot market trading, though no timeline was provided.

But for Zhang Qiang, the challenge runs deeper. Even if the market opens, China's VPP sector still has a long road ahead. Currently, China's VPP operators remain small and fragmented.

"The VPP market is still in the cultivation stage, and it's just as important to build up the capabilities of operators," Zhang said. "After all, the capability of a VPP that aggregates 100,000 enterprises is very different from one that aggregates 100."★

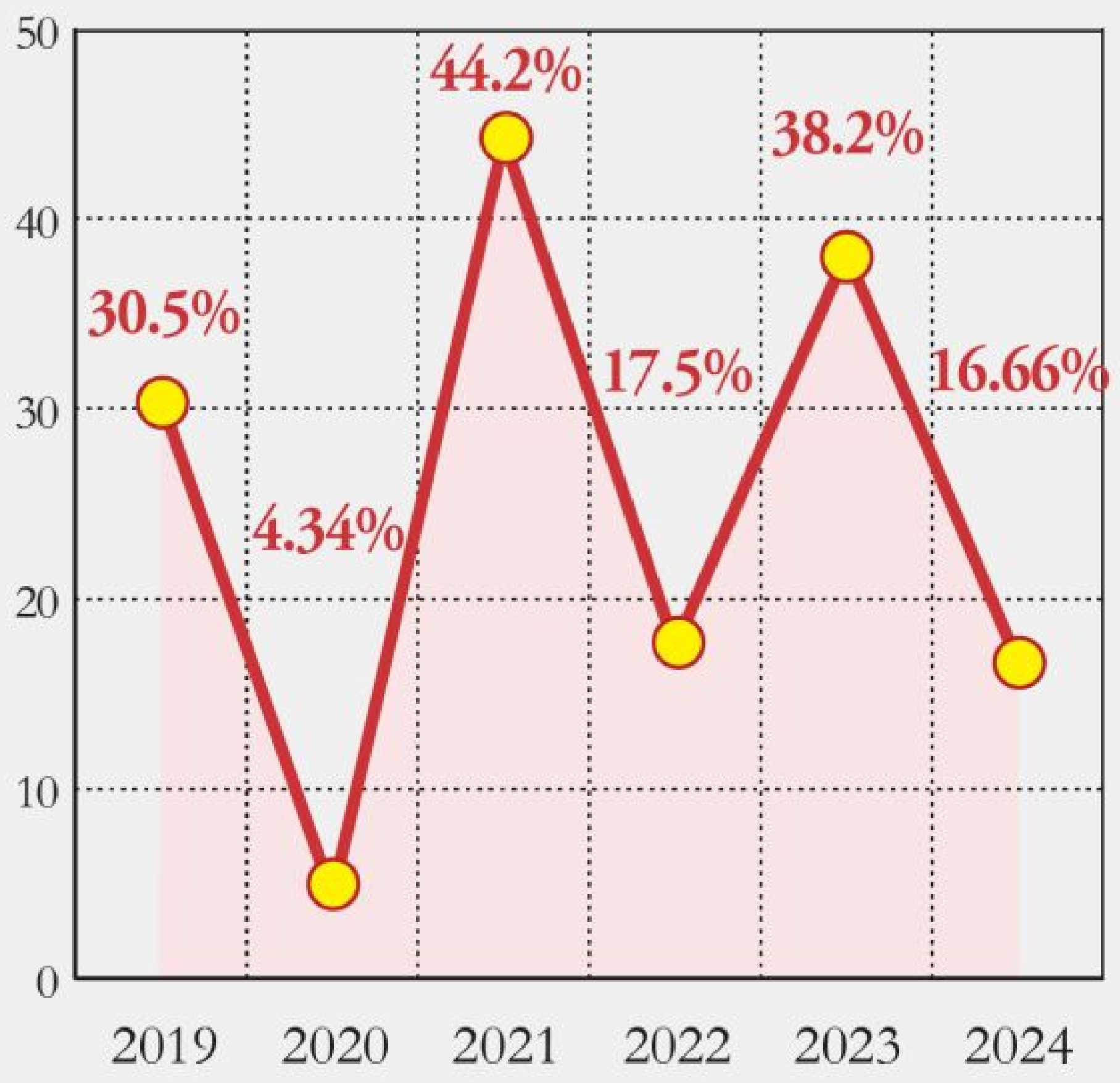
# China By Numbers

## 16.66%

Year-on-year rise in outstanding loans of Chinese consumer finance companies by the end of 2024, totaling 1.35 trillion yuan (US$188.08b)

*Source: China Banking Association*

**Year-on-year change in the outstanding loans of Chinese consumer finance companies between 2019 and 2024**

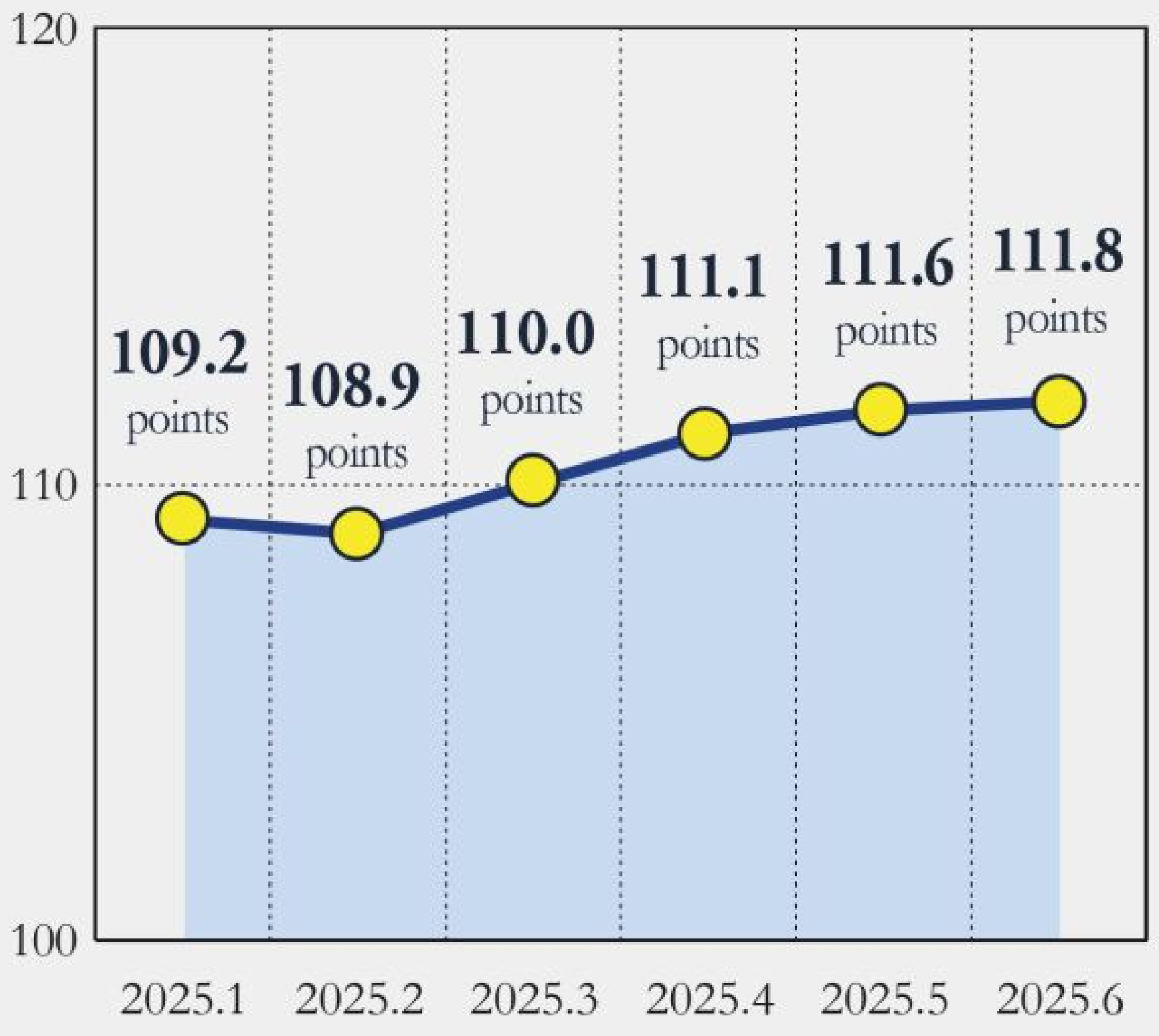


## 111.8 points

China's e-commerce logistics index in June, a rise of 0.2 points over the previous month, marking a rise of four consecutive months

*Source: China Federation of Logistics & Purchasing*

**China's e-commerce logistics index between January and June 2025**



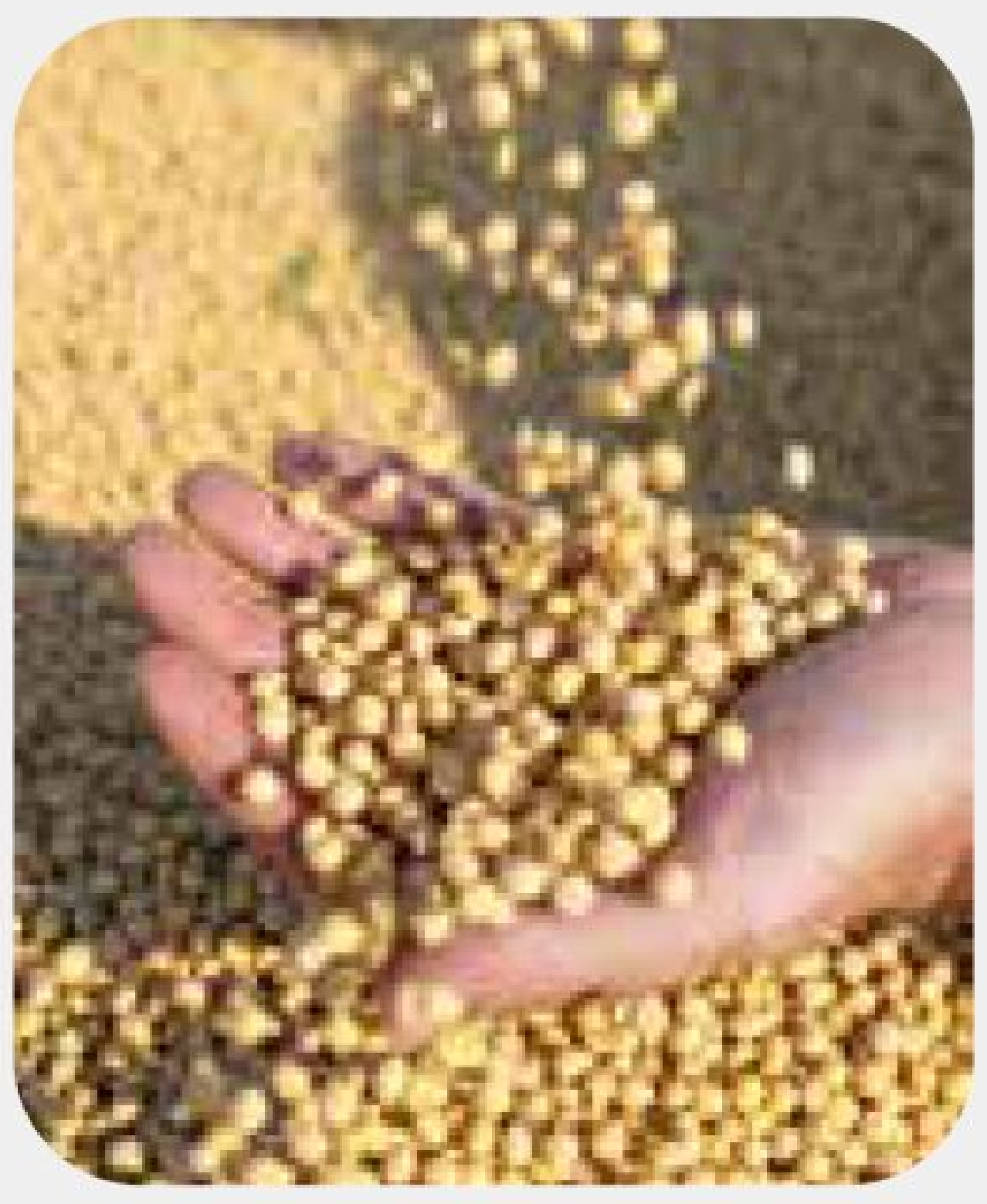
## 133,000 tons

Combined reduction of carbon dioxide emissions in 2024 of new energy vessels docking along the Yangtze River Economic Belt, which comprises 11 provincial-level regions along the Yangtze, due to the use of 190 million kilowatt-hours of shore power

*Source: The Ministry of Transport of China*

## 15.4%

Year-on-year drop in China's soyabean imports in the first five months of 2025, totaling US$16.71 billion



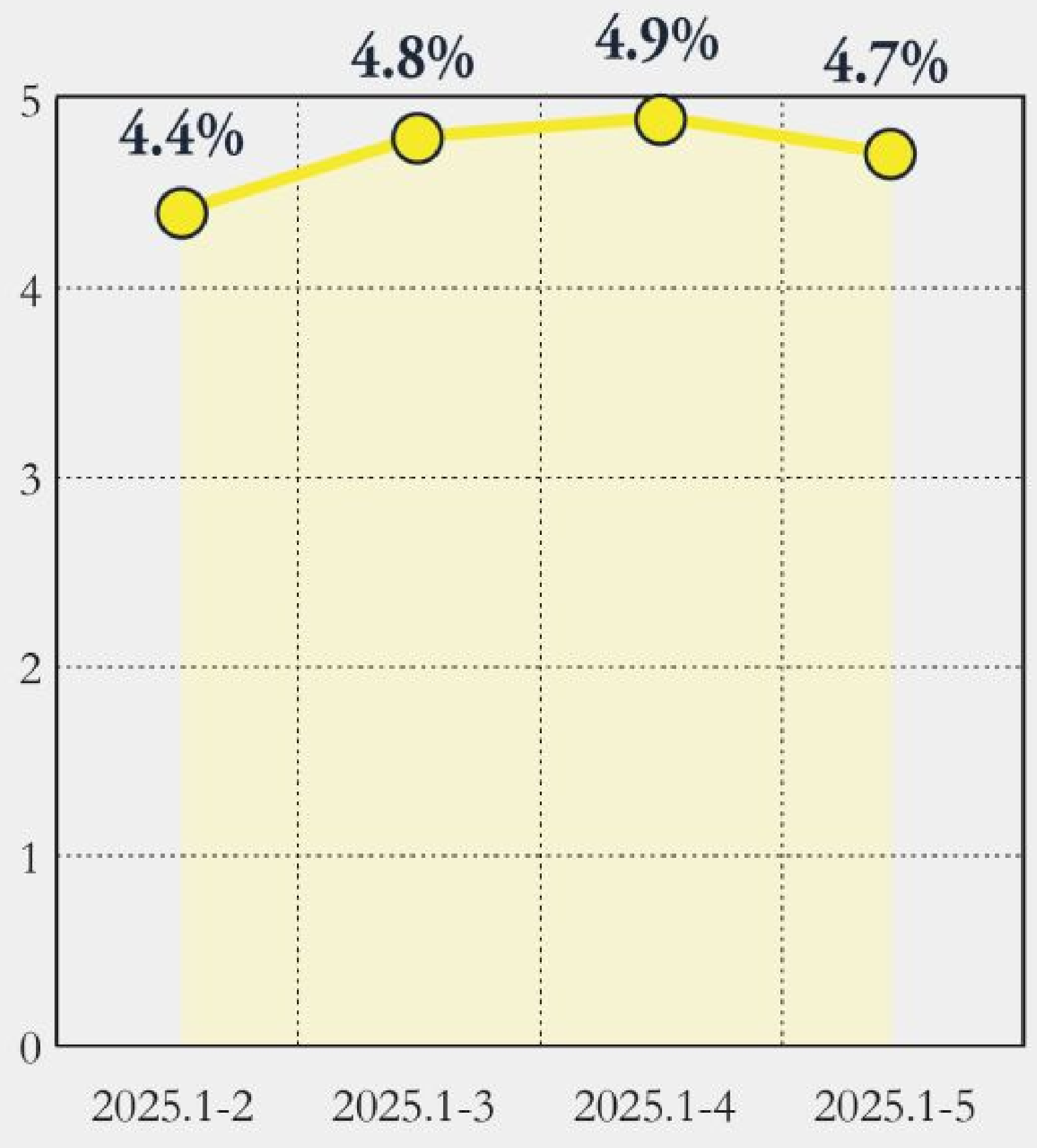
*Source: General Administration of Customs of China / China Chamber of Commerce of I/E of Foodstuffs, Native Produce and Animal By-products*

## 7 percent

Year-on-year growth in the revenue of light industry enterprises above designated size (with annual main business revenue of 20 million yuan, or US$2.8m, and above), totaling 9.27 trillion yuan (US$1.3t), in the first five months of 2025

*Source: China National Light Industry Council*

**Year-on-year change in the revenue of light industry enterprises above designated size between January and May 2025**



Archaeological Discovery

# Sea of Clues

## A new museum in Fujian Province shines a spotlight on major discoveries linking the roots of Austronesian people to the Chinese mainland

By Zhang Yangbin and Yu Xiaodong

A major chapter in the story of humanity's maritime past has come to light with the recent opening of the Keqiutou Site Branch of the China Archaeology Museum in Pingtan, Fujian Province, on April 9.

Located on a quiet stretch of coastline in southeastern China, the museum is more than an institutional milestone. It marks the symbolic and scholarly recognition of groundbreaking discoveries made in recent years that trace the roots of the Austronesian peoples, a seafaring cultural and linguistic group spanning the Pacific, to the Chinese mainland.

### Taiwan and Fujian

The term Austronesian was coined by German-Austrian anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt in 1899, deriving it from the Latin for south (auster) and the Ancient Greek for island (nêsos), to mean the "southern island language" group.

Today, Austronesian peoples refer to indigenous ethnic groups of Taiwan and parts of Southeast Asia, as well as Micronesia, Melanesia, Madagascar, Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and Polynesia – including New Zealand (Aotearoa) and Hawaii. Migrations started 6,000 years ago and lasted until around 1,000 years ago. About 400 million people speak some 1,200 Austronesian languages in the world.

For decades, many archaeologists had placed Taiwan as the origin and linguistic homeland of the Austronesian expansion, often known as the "out-of-Taiwan" theory.

But archaeological discoveries made in recent years challenge this. At Keqiutou Site Museum, over 600 artifacts recovered from Keqiutou and adjacent sites across Pingtan are on display. They range from pottery and bone tools to ancient rice grains and shell ornaments, all dating back 5,000 to 6,500 years.

These artifacts strongly resemble those found at Austronesian sites in Taiwan. Kwang-chih Chang (1931-2001), a renowned archaeologist from Taiwan whose interdisciplinary research focused on ancient East Asia, was among the first to notice the similarities between artifacts found in Fujian and Taiwan. Chang led the excavations in the 1960s of Dabenkeng, the oldest-known Austronesian site on the island.

During a visit to Keqiutou in 1987, two years after excavations began there, Chang noticed similarities between the Keqiutou and Dabenkeng cultures. He argued that Dabenkeng culture originated on the Chinese mainland.

As the concept of Austronesian origins remained a novelty among mainland archaeologists and cross-Straits academic communication was limited, Chang's theory initially attracted little attention. However, with groundbreaking discoveries made in recent years, especially since 2021, the mainland-origin theory has become mainstream in Austronesian origin studies.

### Missing Links

At the Xiying site, part of the larger Keqiutou cultural cluster dating back approximately 6,500 to 7,500 years ago, DNA extracted from human remains reveal a strong maternal genetic link to both Taiwan's indigenous peoples and Austronesian-speaking populations of Southeast Asia. One individual exhibited a distinctive dental modification

Archaeologists excavate pottery, bone tools and ancient rice grains dating back 5,000 to 6,500 years at Keqiutou Neolithic Site, Pingtan, Fujian Province, April 2017 (Photo Courtesy of Pingtan International Institute of Austronesian Research)

– removal of the central incisors – a coming-of-age ritual that survives among some indigenous communities in Taiwan today. The combination of genetic and cultural evidence points to a close, continuous relationship between prehistoric populations on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

In a study published in world leading botany-focused journal *Frontiers in Plant Science* in July 2022, a team of scientists from Peking University, Academia Sinica of Taiwan, the University of Guam and the Australian National University conducted radiocarbon dating and other tests on rice and millet remains from various sites and periods. They concluded that the southeast coast of China was the origin of proto-Austronesian peoples, who acquired their crops and other farming traditions from the Yangtze Valley, then brought them across the Taiwan Strait about 4,800years ago and eventually farther into Southeast Asia.

According to Fan Xuechun, president of the Pingtan International Institute of Austronesian Research, early Austronesian-speaking ancestors were already navigating the Taiwan Strait by around 5,000 years ago. "Evidence shows that cross-Strait travel was frequent and likely involved multiple waves of migration and cultural integration, not the result of a single migration followed by long-term isolated evolution," Fan told *ChinaReport*.

In 2002 and 2003, Fan led joint excavations with scholars from Harvard University and the University of Hawaii at Damaoshan, another crucial Austronesian site on Fujian's Dongshan Island, roughly 300 kilometres southwest of Pingtan.

The pottery assemblage unearthed at the site closely resembled contemporaneous pottery from Taiwan's Penghu Archipelago. In addition, the materials used to make polished axe-like tools called adzes at the site were traced directly to Penghu. This led to two likely scenarios: either Damaoshan inhabitants voyaged to Penghu for materials and trade, or Penghu islanders travelled to Damaoshan to exchange resources. "In either scenario, the conclusion is clear – by 5,000 years ago, seafaring across the Strait was not only possible but routine," Fan said. These findings confirm that active maritime exchanges across the Taiwan Strait predate previously known timelines.

## Linguistic Evidence

Despite the archaeological findings, one challenge for proponents of the mainland-origin theory is finding linguistic evidence. After all, "Austronesian" originated as a linguistic classification based on similarities in languages spoken across a vast region of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. It is more accurately understood as Austronesian-speaking peoples. Therefore, the question is whether the Austronesian language family was once spoken by prehistoric peoples along the coast of Fujian.

According to Deng Xiaohua, a professor at the Institute for Austronesian Studies of Fujian University of Technology, evidence is much harder to find on the Chinese mainland than in areas where Austronesian-speaking peoples live today.

During their migrations, Austronesian-speaking peoples rapidly settled vast uninhabited or sparsely populated islands, where they faced little competition from dominant languages, allowing their languages to evolve independently, Deng told *ChinaReport*.

By contrast, the inhabitants of Fujian

Top: The entrance to Guishan Site, part of Keqiutou Neolithic Site, Pingtan, Fujian Province, July 18, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Above: Artifacts discovered at Guishan Site are displayed at the Pingtan International Institute of Austronesian Research, Fujian Province, July 18, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

have maintained continuous contact with other parts of the Chinese mainland. Over time and multiple waves of mass migration from northern to southern China, the original languages of prehistoric Fujianese were replaced by those of the Sino-Tibetan family. "Consequently, Fujian is not considered part of the Austronesian linguistic sphere," Deng said.

However, Chinese linguists have found faint remnants of Austronesian vocabulary in local dialects. For example, in some Fujian dialects, "foot" is pronounced as *ka*, similar to some Austronesian languages. "There are just too many mysteries surrounding the Austronesian peoples and further studies are needed," Deng added.

## Mystery of Expansion

Another question that continues to confound scholars is why the Austronesians began leaving their homeland to sail into the open ocean around 6,000 years ago.

According to some scholars, such as the late archaeologist Kwang-chih Chang, the driving force was the lure of rare overseas goods and a desire for trade and commerce. Others, like Australian archaeologist Peter Bellwood, believe that the mountainous terrain in Fujian and pressure of feeding growing populations due to the development of rice cultivation pushed local peoples to venture in search of more arable land. This outward-looking tendency endures today – Fujian remains the ancestral homeland of a strikingly large share of the global Chinese diaspora.

Ding Qinghua, an associate researcher with Fujian Museum, suggests that the pursuit of wealth may have been another factor. According to Ding, the pace of Austronesian expansion increased about 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, coinciding with the emergence of shell currency, or cowry money.

More than 6,800 cowries were found buried in the tomb of Lady Fu Hao, a military general, high priestess and wife of King Wu Ding of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1050 BCE), the earliest Chinese dynasty confirmed by archaeological evidence and written records. The cowries in her tomb, dating to around 1200 BCE, are now believed to have originated from regions inhabited by Austronesian peoples. According to Ding, the rising value of shells could have spurred early seafaring in search of wealth and trade opportunities.

While many questions about the origins of the Austronesian people remain unanswered, the opening of the Keqiutou Site Branch of the China Archaeology Museum highlights Fujian's role in the evolving narrative of Austronesian history. With immersive exhibits that vividly reconstruct a time when Fujian's early inhabitants looked to the sea, the museum invites future generations of researchers to continue exploring this rich and complex story.★

Documentary

# Wild Visions

## Director Lu Chuan talks about bringing his new wildlife documentary to Cannes and shares his observations on China's conservation efforts

By Li Yang

A LUCHUAN FILM
西野
Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Wildlife Park
Wildlife & Cinema
SCREEN

Chinese film director Lu Chuan (back row centre) participates in a round table discussion on his documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau at the 78th Cannes Film Festival, May 20, 2025 (Photo Courtesy of Lu Chuan)

Renowned filmmaker Lu Chuan has always had a deep passion for wildlife conservation.

In 2004, Lu's highly acclaimed film *Mountain Patrol: Kekexili* told the true story of volunteers who banded together in the 1990s to protect the once-endangered Tibetan antelope from poachers in Kekexili (Hoh Xil) National Nature Reserve, a mountainous wilderness in Qinghai Province. The gritty and uncompromising film revealed the bleak reality faced by the species, whose population had plummeted to as low as 50,000 in the mid-1990s, mainly due to rampant poaching. After years of conservation efforts, the population has rebounded to more than 300,000 in 2024, according to statistics from Xizang's Department of Ecology and Environment.

In 2016, Lu directed the documentary *Born in China* for Disneynature and Shanghai Media Group. Filmed over the course of a year, it captures intimate moments in the lives of five rare animal species: snow leopards, pandas, golden monkeys, red-crowned cranes and Tibetan antelopes.

On May 20, 2025, the 54-year-old director presented his latest documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau at the 78th Cannes Film Festival. The 30-minute film highlights China's innovative approaches to wildlife rescue and conservation at the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau Wildlife Park (QWP) in Xining, Qinghai Province. The zoo is known for its "QWP Model," which incorporates AI technology to care for injured animals, assess their survival prospects and prioritise their reintroduction into natural habitats.

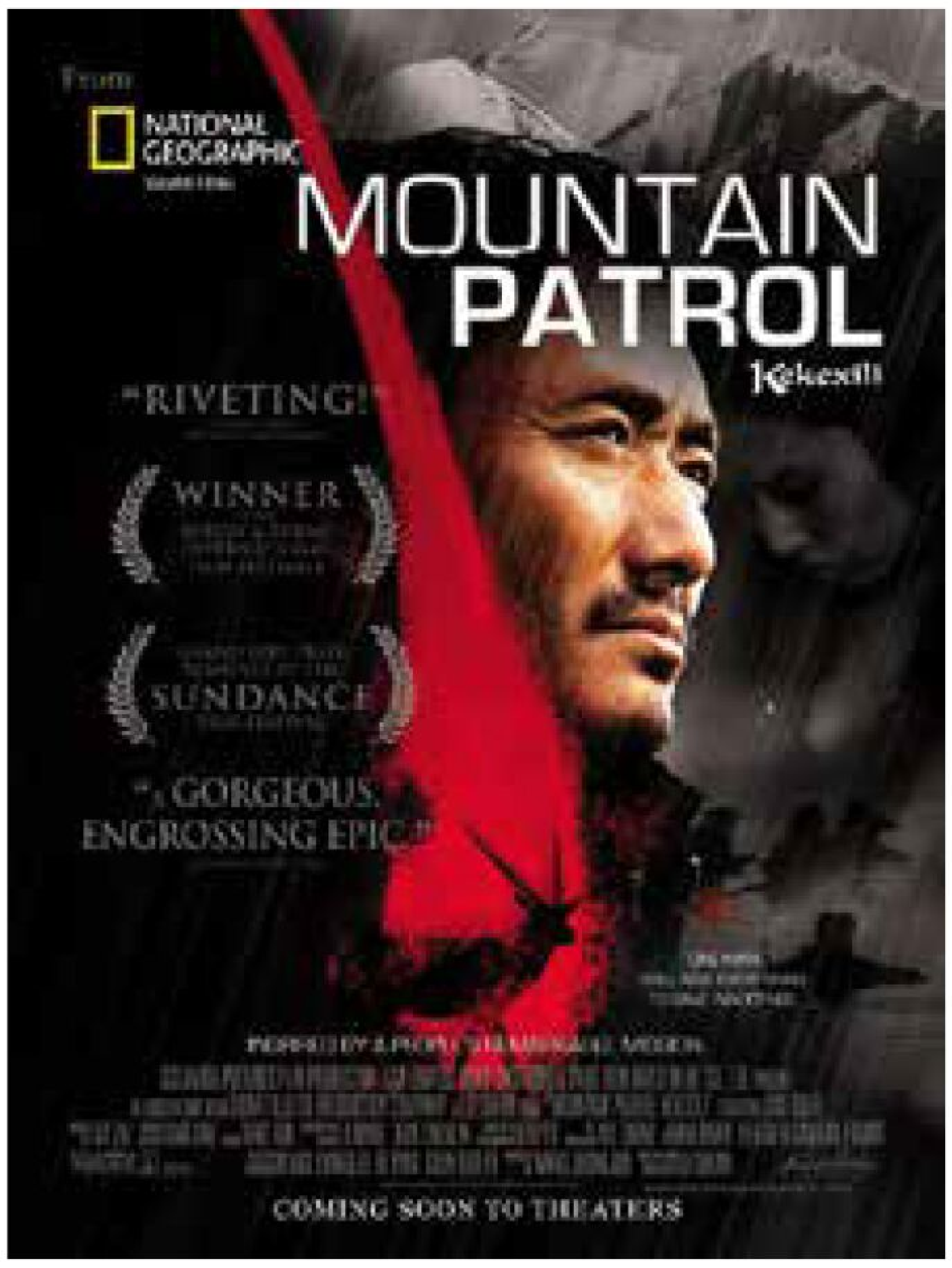
During the screening at Cannes, Lu spoke with China News Service about the making of this documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau and his two-decade journey creating wildlife-themed films.

**CNS**: What message do you want to convey through this new documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau?

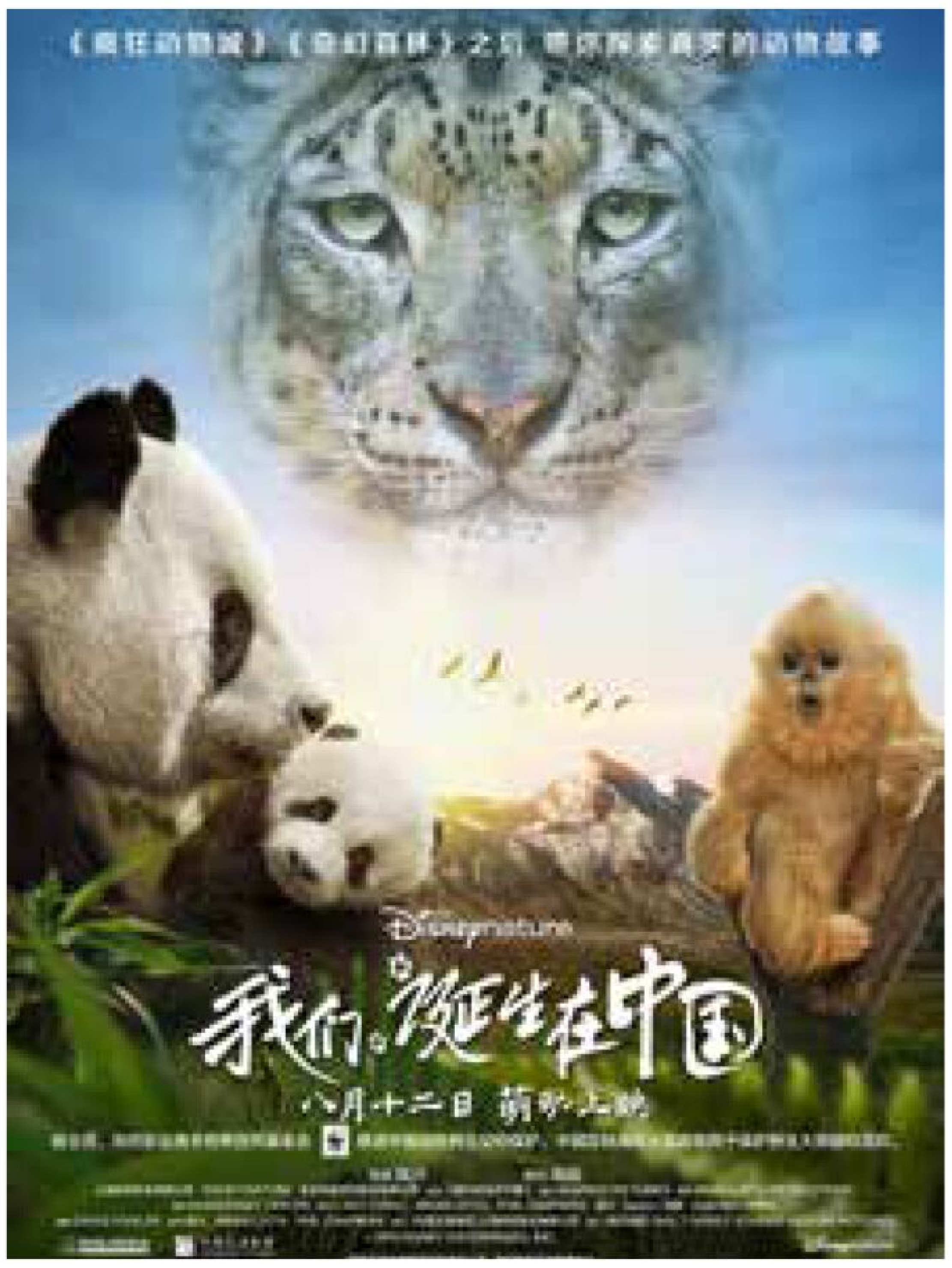
**Lu Chuan**: Over the past 20 years, I've made three films related to wildlife conservation. The first was *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*, which was filmed in Kekexili (Hoh Xil) in 2002 and released in 2004. The second was *Born in China*, a film made in collaboration with Disney in 2013. And 10 years later, I made this documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau. It's hard to describe what it feels like to spend 20 years documenting a country's and a region's wildlife conservation efforts, with the profound changes that have taken place in the country, among conservation researchers and volunteers, among protected animals and reserves, and in the overall commitment and perseverance behind wildlife protection. When you watch these three films, you'll see that there's not the slightest exaggeration or embellishment. They are faithful records.

From the harsh environment of *Kekexili* to *Born in China* and now to this documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, these three films show continuous and positive changes in both the landscapes and the animals living in those reserves.

Twenty years ago, the Wild Yak Brigade in Kekexili (Hoh Xil), along with their sponsor the Western Committee founded by Sonam Dargye who was a local county official, had a very simple idea. They just wanted to keep the animals alive. Today, a new generation of wildlife conservationists has a broader vision. They focus on animal care, rewilding and providing medical treatment. These ideas have evolved alongside China's own development and progress.



Poster for *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*


《疯狂动物城》《奇幻森林》之后 带你探索真实的动物故事
Disneynature
我们诞生在中国
八月十二日 萌动上映

Poster for *Born in China*

My new documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau is the result of many people's ideas and efforts. It shows the process of rescuing and protecting a large number of wild animals. I hope the film, as part of the international exposure made possible by the Cannes Film Festival, can faithfully present the development and philosophy behind China's conservation work.

In my view, all individuals and organisations involved in wildlife conservation are part of one big family, united by the same ideal. We're not trying to promote anything. The greatest value of a documentary is its honest record of the times.

**CNS**: What challenges did you encounter when filming this documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau? How has your mindset changed over the 20-years you have been directing films about humans and nature?

**LC**: This time, the experience felt very different from when we filmed *Kekexili*. Back then, as soon as we arrived, we were told what not to do to avoid altitude sickness: no running, no heavy exercise, no bathing, no drinking. But we challenged every one of those rules. I took bare-chested photos with mountain patrollers at the Kunlun Mountain Pass and played basketball with local young lama monks on a court next to the temple. At that time, I was fanatical, driven by simple faith and some foolhardiness.

As we filmed *Kekexili,* we lost a lot of people on our crew. We started with 108 people, but that shrank to around 40 or 50. More than half fell ill, and some had to be hospitalised for emergency treatment. I think I was the only one who didn't have any major issues. But after returning from the plateau, I began to lose my hair, maybe from the exhaustion I pushed through up there.

When we filmed *Born in China* in 2013, I wasn't as daring as before. Arriving in the Sanjiangyuan area where the Yangtze, Yellow and Lancang (Mekong) rivers originate, I quickly felt out of breath, especially in Kekexili. By the second or third day, I'd get nosebleeds and had to go down to Golmud [Qinghai Province], where the altitude is lower, to recover a bit, or even return to Xining [capital of Qinghai], which

A rescue worker pets a young antelope at the Sonam Dargye Nature Protection Station situated along the Qinghai-Xizang Highway, December 10, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

sits at about 3,100 metres.

This time, when filming this documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, I had more severe altitude sickness. After flying to Xining, I had a splitting headache that night and couldn't sleep. The next day, I had to rely on an oxygen bottle, even though Xining isn't even that high.

China's wildlife conservation has made great leaps over the past 20 years, and I've been fortunate to document those changes across three films. It has been a moving experience. These groundbreaking changes are possible because of China's growing prosperity and strength, and because of increased public awareness of conservation. The first generation of conservationists faced incredibly harsh conditions and real danger. Sonam Dargye and Dhakpa Dorjee, local officials and leaders of the Wild Yak Brigade, even sacrificed their lives. (Sonam Dargye was killed by poachers while attempting to report them to police in 1994. Four years later, Dhakpa Dorjee was found shot dead in his home. Local authorities later ruled it a suicide.)

By the time I started working on *Born in China*, conservation efforts were in much better shape. Conditions had improved significantly, and there was more funding support.

Today, wildlife parks are no longer places where animals are simply imprisoned for life. At Xining Wildlife Park, conservationists use cutting-edge equipment for data collection, cloud storage and real-time statistics. They have a very advanced philosophy in terms of rescuing, treating and rewilding animals.

I used to see zoos as cruel places, but after visiting Xining Wildlife Park, I saw what a zoo could be like, especially in that a wildlife zoo can become a kind of nursing home for injured or disabled animals, a place for elder care or hospice. At the same time, it can help animals recover, breed and eventually re-adapt to the wild before being released. You can really feel that China's approach to wildlife conservation has become very advanced, not only in terms of technology, but also in its ethical and moral outlook.

**CNS**: Where do China's wildlife conservation-themed films stand compared with their peers in the rest of the world?

**LC**: Frankly speaking, the development of China's wildlife documentary industry does not match the progress of its conservation work. The conservation efforts have achieved far more than what has been captured in films or video records.

There should be more domestic productions dedicated to documenting animal conservation in China. For example, films could show the living conditions of the country's rarest wild animals in 2025 and the work being done by China's conservationists, so more children and families can see and learn from them.

No matter how much we do to protect or intervene, each year we still witness the extinction of certain species. What we can do, it seems, is slow that process. We should document these animals to preserve their final beautiful images while they still exist and to draw more public attention to their plight.

**CNS**: AI has brought many changes to the film industry and is also used in this new documentary How do you view AI's impact on filmmaking?

**LC**: From an ethical perspective, the use of AI in animal conservation documentaries should be limited, because they require authenticity. In this documentary on wildlife conservation on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, AI was not used for image generation but rather for processing wildlife-related big data, running simulations, and helping with data analysis. This helped scientists make earlier predictions about disease prevention and treatment in wild animals, and not image creation.

I think AI is triggering profound changes to the entire industry and production process. It can quickly realise your ideas. It speeds up production and visualisation. Plus, it lowers the barriers to film production. AI will transform the entire film industry's ecosystem.★

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Yungang Grottoes

# Face Values

The story of the monumental Buddha statues carved into cliffs at the Yungang Grottoes in Datong is one of faith, persecution and murder, as their designer worked to ensure the survival of Buddhism in early northern China

By Song Yimin and Wang Zhiwei

A Buddha statue (left) modeled after Tuoba Gui, Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei, stands in Cave 20, Yungang Grottoes, Shanxi Province (Photo by VCG)

On May 11, experts and scholars from China, Japan, Italy and other countries gathered in Datong, Shanxi Province for the 2025 Grotto Temple Protection and Inheritance Academic Symposium. The event focused on the conservation and innovative transmission of cultural heritage.

Regarded as one of the cradles of Chinese civilisation, Shanxi is home to numerous cave temples. Among them, the Yungang Grottoes in Datong, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, features 252 caves and more than 51,000 statues with the earliest dating back more than 1,500 years.

The Yungang Grottoes feature many caves that were carved during different periods, but the most striking of these are Caves 16 to 20. These five earliest grottoes are known as the "Five Caves of Tan Yao," named after the designer of their five giant Buddha statues. Tan supervised thousands of workers to carve out the caves and statues in a ridge of Datong's Mount Wuzhou. Dating between 453 and 465, the statues range from around 13 metres to nearly 18 metres in height.

## Turbulent Times

Though historical records are scarce, it is generally believed Tan Yao was a foreigner – a high-ranking monk from Central Asia or today's Northwest China – because he lived when Buddhism was spreading from the West into China's Central Plains.

Tan Yao initially oversaw the construction of the Tiantishan Grottoes close to what is now Wuwei in Northwest China's Gansu Province. These are considered the earliest grottoes in China. They were built under the Northern Liang (397-439) regime, founded by a branch of the nomadic Xiongnu people during the turbulent Sixteen Kingdoms period.

In those war-torn times, political powers in the north rose and fell in quick succession. Different groups competed to adopt Buddhism in order to assert cultural dominance and meet the spiritual needs of the populace.

However, Buddhism did not bring lasting stability to the Northern Liang, which soon was conquered by the Northern Wei (386-534). This was a pivotal dynasty in Chinese history, ending the chaos of the Sixteen Kingdoms and unifying the north. Later, the Northern Wei implemented a policy of Sinicisation, playing a crucial role in the continuation of Han Chinese culture. Yet, it was one of the bloodiest dynasties in Chinese history: of its 14 emperors, 10 died unnatural deaths and only four died of natural causes – and even then, they died young. According to traditional Chinese beliefs, few of them could be said to have died a "good death."

Many later scholars attribute it to a policy established by the founding emperor of the Northern Wei, Tuoba Gui, that stated: "When the son is honoured, the mother must die." The purpose was to prevent empress dowagers and their clans from interfering in state affairs. As a result, when a crown prince was appointed, his birth mother was executed. This practice had been used before – most notably by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) – but it was an isolated case. In the Northern Wei it became institutionalised and was applied consistently, making the palace a place of unending bloodshed from the start.

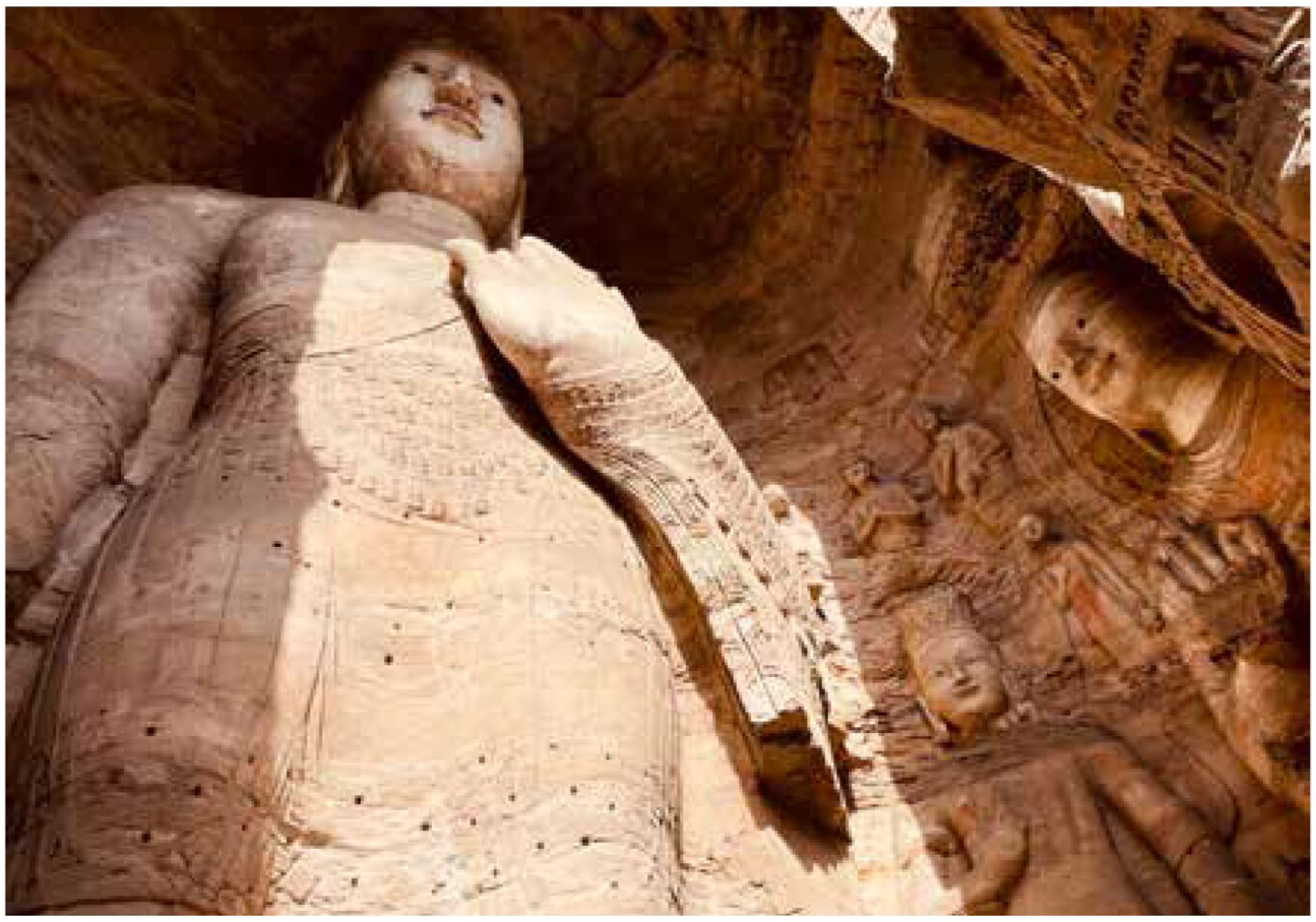
Tuoba Gui, known as Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei, was the model for the famous colossal open-air Buddha in Cave 20 of the Yungang Grottoes. He founded the dynasty at the age of 15 and began a series of military campaigns, defeating nearly all neighbouring regimes. But in his later years, his temperament changed drastically, and he began killing indiscriminately. After appointing his son Tuoba Si as crown prince, he had the boy's mother executed. The young prince was devastated, weeping uncontrollably. Fearing his father's wrath, he fled the palace.

Soon after, Tuoba Gui imprisoned another favoured concubine, possibly planning to make her son, Tuoba Yu, the new crown prince. This incited Tuoba Shao, a hot-tempered 16-year-old prince and son of another concubine, to break into the palace overnight and kill his father with a single blow. Thus, the great founding emperor Tuoba Gui met a violent end at the age of just 39 in 409. Ironically, in the context of Northern Wei emperors, this already made him one of the longest-lived rulers – second only to one other.

The exiled Tuoba Si later returned to the capital with his troops, killed his brother Tuoba Shao to quell the rebellion, and ascended the throne as Emperor Mingyuan. Tuoba Si was considered a relatively good emperor, but he reigned for only a little over a decade before dying of illness brought on by the rigours of war. He was only 32, and had ruled from 409 to 423.

His successor, Tuoba Tao, became the third emperor of the Northern Wei and was known as Emperor Taiwu. He was a formidable and powerful ruler who, during his reign from 423 to 452, unified northern China and pushed his military campaigns from the Yellow River region all the way to the Yangtze River. It was Emperor Taiwu who conquered the Northern Liang kingdom.

After the fall of the Northern Liang, Tan Yao – the monk who had once overseen the construction of the Tiantishan Grottoes for the Liang royal family – was captured. Whether as a master craftsman or an accomplished monk, he possessed exactly the right skills the Northern Wei urgently needed. Tan Yao was taken to the Northern Wei capital of Pingcheng (modern-day



A Buddha statue modeled on Tuoba Tao, Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei, in Cave 18, Yungang Grottoes, Shanxi Province (Photo by VCG)

Datong), where he received generous treatment and established connections with the ruling Tuoba family.

Emperor Taiwu had a profound impact on Chinese history, not only for unifying the north but also for initiating the first of the four major anti-Buddhist persecutions in Chinese history, known collectively as "the four suppressions of Buddhism."

## Five Caves of Tan Yao

Since its founding, the Northern Wei's emperors had deep reverence for Buddhism. So, why did Emperor Taiwu turn against it? The turning point came during a campaign to suppress a rebellion. While dealing with the unrest, Emperor Taiwu discovered that a temple in what is now Shaanxi was secretly stockpiling weapons and providing financial support and shelter to the rebels. Known for his ruthless disposition, Taiwu flew into a rage and ordered a crackdown on Buddhism.

Unlike later anti-Buddhist campaigns, which mainly forced monks to return to secular life and reclaimed temple-owned land for economic reasons, this first persecution was brutal: countless monks and nuns faced death, their lives hanging by a thread.

Fortunately, Crown Prince Tuoba Huang was serving as regent in the court and responsible for carrying out the emperor's orders. Tuoba Huang knew his father was acting out of rage, and while he had no choice but to enforce the decree to suppress Buddhism, he was a devout believer. So, when it came to the executions, he deliberately slowed down the process, causing delays and reducing the severity of the measures. This gave Tan Yao and a number of other eminent monks the opportunity and time to escape from Pingcheng.

Nevertheless, this manoeuvre brought disaster upon Tuoba Huang. His political enemies, especially Zong Ai, the emperor's favoured eunuch, seized the chance to accuse one of the crown prince's trusted ministers of plotting rebellion. Enraged by the supposed betrayal, Emperor Taiwu immediately ordered the execution of the minister. Tormented by fear and grief, Tuoba Huang soon fell seriously ill and died in 451, aged only 23.

Upon his son's death, Emperor Taiwu was filled with regret. Zong Ai, realising that the emperor might now take revenge for the crown prince's death, decided to strike first. He entered the palace and assassinated Emperor Taiwu. And so the once-mighty Taiwu died in confusion and betrayal at the hands of a eunuch at just 45 years old, though it was enough to make him the longest-lived emperor in the history of Northern Wei.

After Emperor Taiwu's death, Zong Ai installed the late crown prince's younger brother, Tuoba Yu, on the throne. Yet within six months, Zong Ai assassinated the new emperor as well. Court officials, shocked that Zong Ai had now murdered two emperors in succession, finally rose up, executed Zong Ai brutally, and enthroned Tuoba Jun, son of the late crown prince Tuoba Huang. He became known as Emperor Wencheng, who ruled from 452 to 465, dying at only around 25.

Emperor Wencheng is remembered for two particularly notable achievements. One was his marriage to Empress Feng, a woman of the Feng clan who would later become the famed Empress Dowager Feng and a key figure who promoted the full-scale Sinicisation of the Northern Wei and played a pivotal role in preserving Han Chinese civilisation. The other was his complete reversal of Emperor Taiwu's anti-Buddhist policy, instead becoming a vigorous supporter of Buddhism.

## Emperors' Likeness

He appointed the monk Tan Yao as "sramana general-in-chief," the highest-ranking official in charge of all Buddhist and Daoist affairs. Tan Yao established formal institutions, secured stable economic support for temples and organised the large-scale translation of Buddhist scriptures. Most importantly, he initiated the excavation of the Yungang Grottoes.

Having personally witnessed the bloodshed and terror of the anti-Buddhist persecutions, Tan Yao constantly feared that such tragedies might one day return. Seeking to allow Buddhism to permanently take root in China and be spared from destruction by future emperors, he drew inspiration from the Indian and Central Asian practice of carving monumental grottoes.

His idea was simple but powerful: if the Buddha statues were carved large enough to be grand and imposing, they would awe officials and the public, and would be physically difficult to destroy. Even if someone wished to erase them, it would take enormous effort.

But beyond size, Tan Yao had an even more ingenious idea. He proposed modeling each of the Buddha statues after the physical likenesses of the five emperors of Northern Wei up to that point, from the dynasty's founder Tuoba Gui to the reigning Emperor Wencheng, Tuoba Jun. This way, the images would not only serve their religious purpose but also honour imperial ancestors, ensuring that future rulers would hesitate to destroy what were essentially portraits of their forefathers, even if they turned against Buddhism.

This plan won the full support and approval of Emperor Wencheng, and Tan Yao began excavating the first five caves of the Yungang Grottoes, now numbered Caves 16 to 20, each corresponding to one of the five emperors. Within two of them, he incorporated some especially thoughtful design elements.

Among the "Five Caves of Tan Yao," the largest Buddha statue is that of the founding emperor, Daowu (Tuoba Gui). But what about the third emperor, Emperor Taiwu, who was infamous for persecuting Buddhists? Since he was the reigning emperor's grandfather, leaving him out was not an option. So, Tan Yao came up with a clever solution: he dressed the statue in a heavy "Thousand-Buddha Robe," adorned with over a thousand small Buddha heads, symbolising the immense karmic debt Taiwu owed to the Buddhist community. The statue's hands were posed in a gesture of repentance, and the weight of the robe represented the lasting burden he was to bear.

As for the fourth emperor, who was placed on the throne by the eunuch Zong Ai and quickly killed, Tan Yao made a significant adjustment. Instead of portraying this short-lived ruler, he replaced him with a statue of the late Crown Prince Tuoba Huang, Emperor Wencheng's father.

After all, it was Tuoba Huang who had slowed the enforcement of Emperor Taiwu's anti-Buddhist decree, saving countless monks and nuns, though at the cost of his own life. Still, since Tuoba Huang never officially became emperor, his statue was made slightly shorter than the others, subtly indicating that even a Buddha must compromise with worldly rules, and that even sanctity bends before imperial power.

Tan Yao's approach, even by modern standards, proved remarkably effective. His "Five Caves" sparked a wave of Buddhist grotto carving throughout northern China.

Over the next century, the Yungang Grottoes expanded from the original five caves to 45 major caves and over 200 subsidiary niches. Buddhism flourished across China alongside this monumental artistry. With later reforms and the relocation of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang by Emperor Xiaowen (Tuoba Hong, 467-499, a grandson of Emperor Wencheng), Central China's Henan Province, a new golden age began, marked by the grand, centuries-long excavation of the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang.

Today, both the Yungang and Longmen Grottoes are UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites, admired around the world. And in the Five Caves of Tan Yao, the five great Buddhas, modeled on dynastic leaders who operated and witnessed the rise, fall and revival of Buddhism, still sit in solemn majesty, silently watching the tides of Chinese history.★

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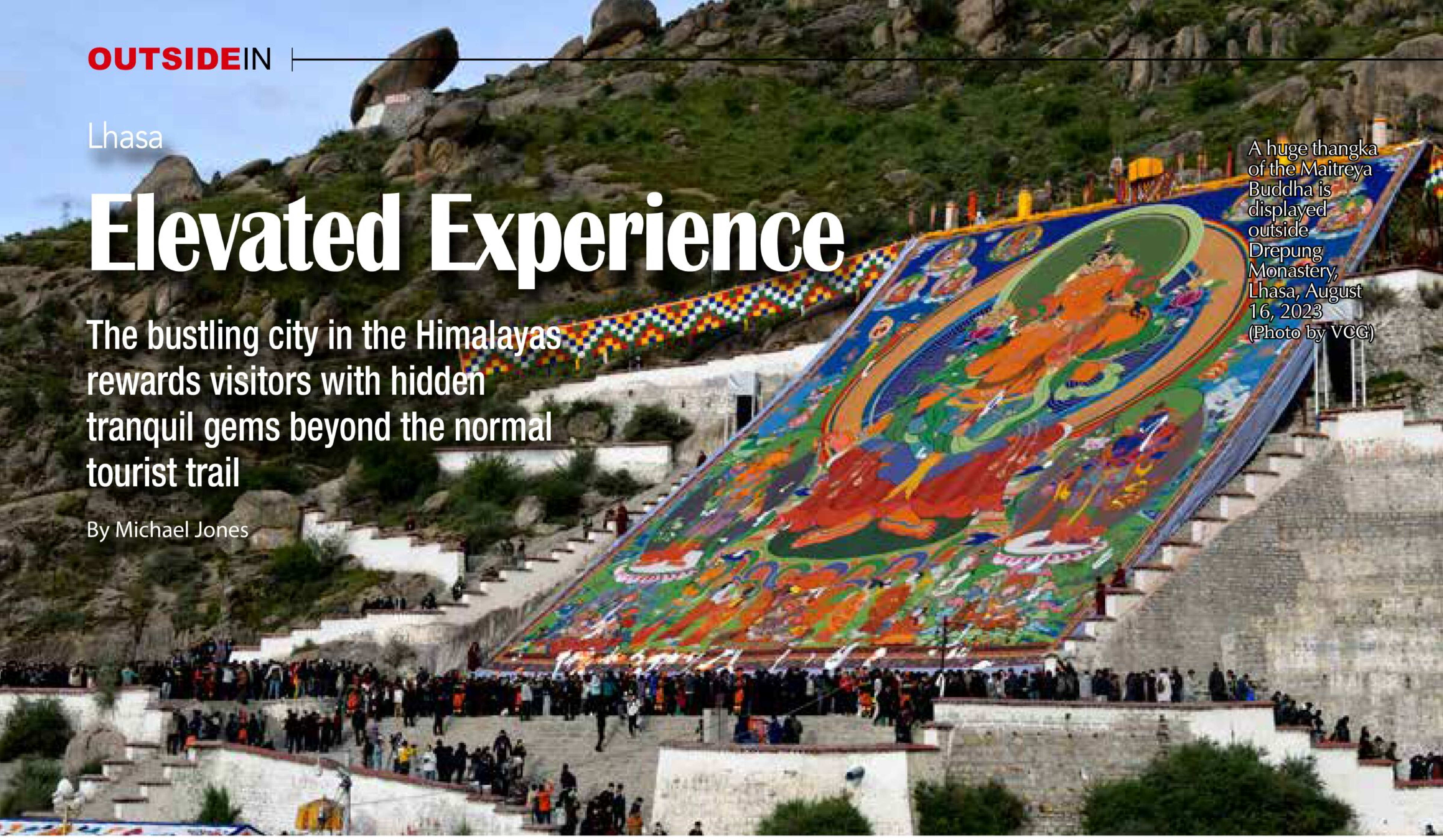

Lhasa

# Elevated Experience

## The bustling city in the Himalayas rewards visitors with hidden tranquil gems beyond the normal tourist trail

By Michael Jones

A huge thangka of the Maitreya Buddha is displayed outside Drepung Monastery, Lhasa, August 16, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

A week may sound like a long time to spend visiting one city, but Lhasa, high up on the Himalayan plateau at 3,656 metres in altitude, is no ordinary destination. Over my week in Lhasa, capital of Xizang Autonomous Region, I was amazed by just how much history, culture and sheer beauty there was to experience. Like many visitors, my journey began by exploring the more familiar attractions, such as the majestic Potala Palace, which rises above the city like a stone manifestation of religious power and supremacy. Wandering through its ancient halls, I felt the weight of centuries of history and religion pressing gently on my shoulders. Just a short walk from the Potala Palace, the sacred Jokhang Temple offers a quieter, more intimate spiritual experience, and is an absolute requirement for any visitor's itinerary. Jokhang Temple is ringed by the famous Barkhor Street, where a constant, hypnotic swirl of pilgrims and market traders add a surreal quality to the visiting experience. This is a corner of the world where religious devotion and bustling commerce coexist in a most fascinating way. Other famous attractions I visited included those on the outskirts of the city, such as the sprawling Drepung Monastery, and the famous debating monks of Sera Monastery, whose rhythmic claps echo across the courtyard, leaving a lasting impression on both the mind and soul.

### Get Thee to a Nunnery

However, while Lhasa's most iconic landmarks rightly tend to dominate the tourist trail, what surprised me most during my time in the city was just how many remarkable sites lie quietly beyond the scope of the average tour group. Xizang, after all, is home to a staggering number of temples, monasteries and nunneries, many of which go unnoticed by commercial itineraries. Lhasa boasts several fascinating and informative museums and art galleries, designed to inform visitors about the region's history, and some of the lesser known dimensions of local culture. Moreover, Lhasa is a thriving and living city, which includes numerous unique shops, bars and restaurants. This is exactly why taking a little extra time to explore Lhasa is a real gift for those who enjoy wandering off the beaten path.

Many of the lesser-known religious sites in Lhasa are far smaller and humbler than their famous neighbours and are all the more meaningful for it. They offer an intimate window into the daily rhythms of Tibetan spiritual life, where incense wafts through shaded courtyards, and prayer wheels spin with quiet devotion. One of my favourite discoveries was Ani Tsankhung Nunnery, hidden away in the narrow alleys of central Lhasa. It does not demand an entire afternoon, but I found myself lingering far longer than expected. There was something deeply calming about sitting in the modest courtyard, simply observing the lives of the shaven-headed nuns as they moved purposefully through their day, sweeping, chanting, praying or tending the small kitchen that serves up humble vegetarian cuisine. In contrast to the crowds at Jokhang Temple or Sera Monastery, I found myself the only visitor inside

Locals and tourists browse the Barkhor Bazaar on Chinese New Year's Eve, Lhasa, January 28, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

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XIZANG
LHASA

the nunnery other than my guide. None of the residents fussed over my presence, rather they greeted me with politeness and genuine warmth and I was left to soak in the serenity.

Many of Lhasa's smaller sites ask only a nominal fee for entry, and include basic facilities that visitors are welcome to use, such as public toilets and canteens. Once such destination is Ramoche Monastery, which felt like stepping into a living relic of the past. Dating back to the 7th century, it is one of Lhasa's most atmospheric sites, yet sees remarkably few visitors. Nestled quietly behind the more famous landmarks, its halls are filled with exquisite Buddhist art, from delicate thangkas to solemn statues that radiate centuries of silent devotion. In the cool shadows of its corridors, I sensed something unfiltered and enduring, pockets of authentic Tibetan life, still beating gently beneath the city's ever-modernising surface.

A short walk away, just off Beijing Middle Road, lies Kundeling Temple. Modest and a little rough around the edges, this temple captured my heart. Two restored chapels are open to the public, and I was fortunate to visit on a cold but sunny morning when the light streamed through the lattice windows. I learned that the monastic community consisted of approximately 42 monks, 10 of them barely out of their teens. These young monks take on much of the daily labor, from sweeping the courtyards to cooking simple meals and tending to minor repairs. There are no smartphones or distractions here. Life is quiet, austere and deeply disciplined. It was humbling to witness their quiet dedication.

Perhaps the grandest surprise of all was the Norbulingka. Despite being one of Lhasa's most historically significant sites, the summer residence of the Dalai Lamas since 1755 and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, few foreign tourists seem to make it here. Spanning over 36 hectares, the gardens are lush and serene, with shaded pathways, still ponds and brightly painted pavilions. During the warmer months, the grounds come alive with music, dancing and festivities. For those with an interest in Xizang's more formal historical narratives, Lhasa Museum is worth a visit. Though still under expansion, this official government museum offers an informative look at Xizang's complex past. Plans are underway to significantly enlarge its galleries, promising even richer displays in the future.

## Yak Time

On a very different note, I could not help but be charmed by the Yak Museum. Independently funded and strikingly modern in its architecture, the Yak Museum blends ethnography with contemporary art. The museum is dedicated to exploring Tibetan culture and the centrality of the yak in Tibetan life, not just as a beast of burden, but as a cultural symbol, food source and spiritual companion. I found myself engrossed in exhibits that ranged from traditional artifacts to bold multimedia installations. It is a museum that surprises and delights in equal measure.

Of course, no trip to Lhasa would be complete without exploring its culinary landscape. One of the most pleasant surprises about the city is the sheer variety of food on offer. Lhasa is, after all, a meeting point of cultures. Naturally, I sampled traditional Tibetan food – the yak's cheese dumplings were a fascinating experience, though perhaps not something I would order again – as well as delicious Nepalese curries, hearty North Indian dishes and other classic Chinese favourites. For those craving a taste of home, there are also excellent Western-style cafés and restaurants dotted throughout the city. Namaste Restaurant, with its two convenient branches, became a firm favourite of mine. With a menu that spans local, Nepalese, Indian and international dishes, it's a welcoming place to relax, refuel and reflect after a day of exploring. One branch is just steps away from the lively Barkhor Street, ideal for a post-shopping meal.

As my time in Lhasa drew to a close, I found myself moved by the city's quiet resilience and spiritual depth. Lhasa is a place where ancient rituals continue uninterrupted and monks chant beneath the same snow-capped peaks that have watched over generations. Whether marveling at the grandeur of Potala Palace or sipping tea in a hidden nunnery courtyard, I was reminded time and again that Xizang is not merely a destination, it is an experience that refreshes the soul. For those willing to look beyond the headline sites, Lhasa offers a glimpse into living culture, sacred tradition and everyday beauty.★

### Practicalities

Lhasa has flight connections to major Chinese cities as well as some direct international flights. Trains connect Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Xining. All foreign tourists must use an accredited tour agency and guide services to travel to Lhasa. Due to the altitude, visitors should rest on arrival before undertaking strenuous activity.

# Gratuitous Behaviour

By Mina Yan

As an American who grew up in a country where tipping is practically mandatory – where you're expected to add 15-20 percent to every restaurant bill, tip your barista, tip your grocery checkout person, and even guilt-tip at self-service kiosks (a concept that I still don't understand because if I'm doing the work, shouldn't I be the one getting the tip?), you'd think I'd be used to it, but I'm not. On top of it, I'm a people pleaser who's constantly worried that I'm under-tipping every single time I dine out.

But not here. Dining out in China feels like a breath of fresh air. Here, there's no awkward maths at the end of a meal, no anxiety over whether you tipped enough, and no judgement from servers expecting extra money. And you know what? It's better this way.

In the US, the listed price on a menu is not what you're actually paying for. By the time you add tax, which varies by state, and tip, your US$20 meal suddenly costs US$25 or more. In China, what you see is what you pay. There's no mental gymnastics trying to calculate percentages, no pressure to "round up" to avoid looking cheap, and no fear of getting chased down by a server because you "only" left 12 percent instead of 20 percent.

I didn't realise this until a friend explained it to me, but in the US, the state minimum wage law doesn't actually apply certain occupations like restaurant waiters. They're paid as little as US$2.13 an hour (which is the federal minimum wage) because tips are expected to make up the difference. This puts the burden on customers to ensure workers earn a living wage, a system that's awkward for both diners and employees. It's also why in the US you get over the top enthusiastic servers checking in on you every few minutes. But to be completely fair, depending on what type of establishment someone is working at, they can very much be making more than the state minimum wage based on the generosity of their clientele.

To me, it always felt like waiters in the US are faking niceness for a few extra bucks at the end of the meal. But here, waiters are helpful without putting on an act. If you need something, you can ask; if you don't, they won't interrupt your meal every five minutes. It's a more relaxed, respectful way to dine. Who likes having a stranger interrupt their conversations and those obligatory small talks?

In China, restaurant staff are paid regular salaries, and in many cases, the restaurant also provides them with staff meals and housing. They don't rely on tips to survive, which means they don't have to perform exaggerated friendliness or hover over your table hoping for a bigger payout. Service is still efficient and professional, but it's not transactional. It's not a practice that's exclusive to China, in fact, the whole tipping culture is the oddball out. In other Asian countries and countries in Europe, waiters don't expect you to leave a tip either because they're all paid decent wages.

The tipping culture in the US has actually made me hate dining out. If you go somewhere where the service is terrible, you're still obligated to tip. But what are you paying for then? I've once had a waiter who angrily delivered my food without a word, then returned to the counter where she continued to pick her nose while looking off into space. That time, we were so grossed out that we left without leaving a tip. And as we walked a step out of the restaurant, she came running out asking why there was no tip.

> China's no-tipping culture proves that restaurants can function just fine, actually, better by not forcing customers to subsidise workers' wages

And many restaurants nowadays will do the maths for you and print it on the bottom of your bill. You're given options for tipping 15, 20, 30 or 50 percent. If you're expecting me to shell out money already, why not just add it to the price of the food and save us the hassle of the maths and guilt challenge?

China's no-tipping culture proves that restaurants can function just fine, actually, better by not forcing customers to subsidise workers' wages. It makes people pleasers like me feel at ease when I can leave a restaurant without wondering if I under-tipped or over-tipped, and it saves waiters the mental exhaustion of having to make small talk with strangers every shift.★

# Ruff Rides

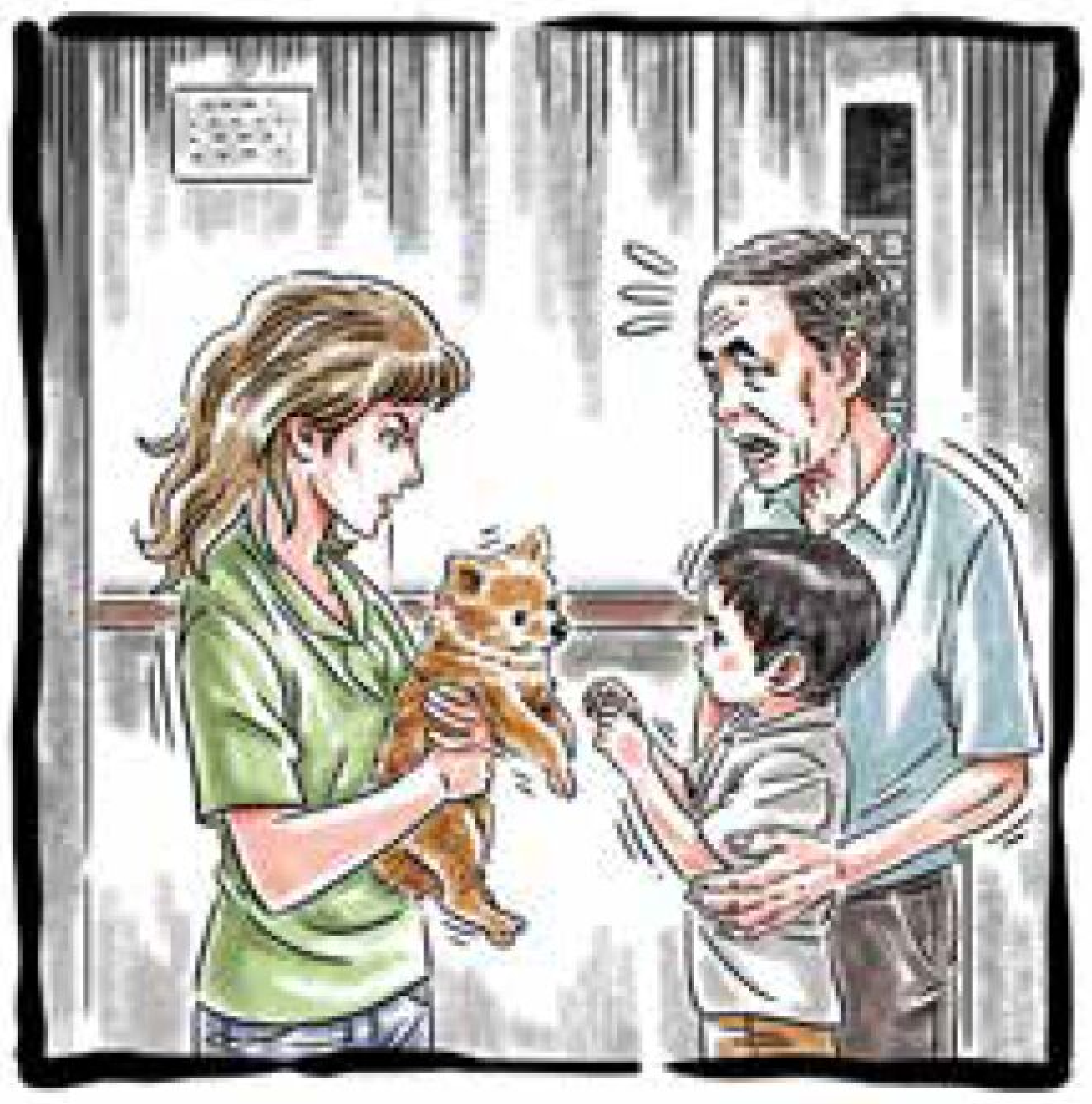
By Suzanne Robare

The more character I see in animals, the more I adore them. By "character" I mean the quirks that make them unique, such as the dead-eyed stare my dog Dickie leveled at me when her bedtime came around. If I wasn't willing to immediately jump up and turn off all the lights and devices at 9 pm sharp, she would glare at me, trot to her bed, then reappear every 15 minutes on the dot to look at me reproachfully until I finally gave in and went to bed so she could get her beauty sleep. Dickie wasn't the only little dog with quirks: my Elsie got so excited by the drive-through window at McDonald's that she jumped out of the car straight into the arms of the cashier. To be honest, I was so excited by the thought of a drive-through McDonald's in China that I was practically falling out the passenger window myself, but Uncle Ma, the driver, was less than enthusiastic about having six kilos of puppy launch herself off his groin with enough force to fly in a perfect arc up and out of a car window.

He let out a scream worthy of a castrato and shouted, "Your dog bit me!" I opened up Dickie's jaws and wordlessly showed him that my dog had no teeth

I've learned not to talk about my dogs in public, or at work, or anywhere really. I start telling a story and I see eyes glazing over. I kind of understand – I'm no fan of long-winded stories about how adorable someone's cats are – but at least I'm tolerant of the stories, and of the love people have for their pets. I may not like the fact you have pet ferrets, for example, but as long as they're not an endangered species and they are treated well and kindly, it's not really my business. What IS my business, however, is not you treat my pet.

Dickie came into our lives as a homeless, toothless three-week old puppy, too young to be from her mother. I bottle fed her at first, taking her outside to walk (and hopefully wee) on the grass. Alas, that hope was in vain. But I still took her out dutifully every hour, hoping that this time would see the breakthrough. After a week or so she grew much stronger and started to look forward to the lift ride down 23 stories (the grass, not so much). This tiny ball of fluff fit into the palm of my hand: most people oohed and aahed over how stinking cute she was. On one lift ride down we were joined by an elderly gentleman with his grandson, who was about 2 years old. Grandpa took one look at tiny fluffball Dickie and let out a scream, shouting that I could not bring a wild beast onto the lift. I held my ground and refused to leave. Grandpa started shouting that his grandson was afraid of dogs. Grandson, however, put his little hand out to Dickie, who licked his finger in return. The grandson laughed. This enraged Grandpa, who then shouted at the boy, "Are you or are you not afraid of dogs?" The grandson calmly replied, "Not afraid." Grandpa turned beet red and shouted, "Are you or are you not afraid of dogs?" to which the grandson replied again, "Not afraid." At that moment Dickie, ever the peace maker, reached out and licked Grandpa, who jumped up and back so quickly I thought the lift might come off its tracks. He let out a scream worthy of a castrato and shouted, "Your dog bit me!" I opened up Dickie's jaws and wordlessly showed him that my dog had no teeth. He then turned to his grandson, who was calmly taking this all in, and shouted for the final time, "Are you or are you not afraid of dogs?" and the grandson, apparently wiser than his years, replied calmly, "Afraid."



The lift door opened, we disembarked, and Grandpa and grandson strode out, Grandpa shouting about the killer dog at the top of his lungs and threatening police action.

I'd like to say that Dickie lived up to expectation and finally made her tiny wee-wee on something that wasn't the kitchen floor, like some grass or even better, Grandpa's foot, but she held it in until we got home. As I was wearily mopping up yet another round of puppy wee, I told my 15-year-old daughter what happened. She yawned, her eyes glazing over, and said, "Well, at least it isn't a story about a cat."★

# A Dish by Any Other Name

By Mina Yan

After I pick up my daughter from kindergarten, we talk about her day. I ask her what games she played, her highlights and what she ate. The other day, when I asked what she had to eat at school, she said "ants and they were on trees." Um, excuse me, what?

On the drive home we kept talking about these "ants" she had. Did she lick them off a tree in the playground (gross, I hoped not…) or did the school try to be adventurous and stir-fry up some ants for added protein?

After a few minutes, it clicked; she had Ants Crawling on Trees (蚂蚁上树), a popular Chinese dish that contains neither ants nor trees. It's vermicelli noodles topped with minced pork.

Apparently, when the dish was first created, someone thought the finely minced meat looked like tiny ants crawling on the noodles, and just like that, the name stuck.

But Ants Crawling on Trees isn't the only dish with a name that's got absolutely nothing to do with the ingredients. And at restaurants where they translate their menus literally, the English actually makes it even more confusing.

So why do Chinese dishes insist on having these odd names? Sometimes it actually has to do with the dish's origin myth, like Beggar's Chicken. They're not saying you're cheap for ordering it. it's more to do with the story of how a beggar stole a chicken, cocooned it in mud, roasted it and unexpectedly created a culinary masterpiece.

Other times, dishes are given auspicious names, like Gold and Silver Fried Rice (金银炒饭). It's basically just egg-fried rice, but man, doesn't it sound way fancier? My mum used to say these names are given to dishes with cheap ingredients so that restaurants can justify higher prices.

Other times, the name comes from visual likeness like Lions Head Meatballs (狮子头), which are giant by the way, or Tiger Skin Peppers that get their name from the grill marks that resemble the striped fur of China's protected Amur tigers.

Dish-naming convention in the US is often just what the ingredients are and how they're made. Like if you're ordering grilled salmon with lemon zest, you're not going to see something along the lines of Dragon Scales in Sprinkles of Sunlight.

But which do you prefer: a straightforward name or something more poetic? Because if you're being straightforward about it, dumplings are essentially "random stuff wrapped in dough." I don't know about you, but "dumpling" sounds way better.

## REALCHINESE

lǎo qián fēng

老钱风

laoqianfeng

### Old money aesthetic

A growing number of young Chinese people are embracing a low-key luxury style known as *laoqianfeng*, literally meaning "old money aesthetic."

The term originates from Western concepts of "old money" and "new money." Old money usually refers to aristocratic families with generational wealth, known for their understated taste and confidence. In contrast, new money is flashy and often emphasises conspicuous consumption.

The *laoqianfeng* look values well-tailored, high-quality clothing. Instead of flaunting designer logos, the focus is on craftsmanship, fabric quality and coordination, while favouring muted colors like white, black, grey and brown. Timeless and versatile pieces like a well-fitted coat, cashmere sweater or elegant dress are staples of the aesthetic.

For many young people, *laoqianfeng* offers an attainable form of elegance. While they may not be able to afford bespoke, they can still create the old money look with fewer but better-quality, affordable clothes. Many netizens said they now prefer to strategically buy a few carefully designed pieces over large quantities of inexpensive, fast-fashion clothing.

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